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WHAT LIBERAL MEDIA?

by ERIC ALTERMAN

BUSH'S BIG BAD BUDGET
Robert L. Borosage

COLUMBIA DOWN
Wayne Biddle

MEDIA DEMOCRACY'S MOMENT
Robert W. McChesney and John Nichols

EUROPE'S ANTIWAR MOVEMENT
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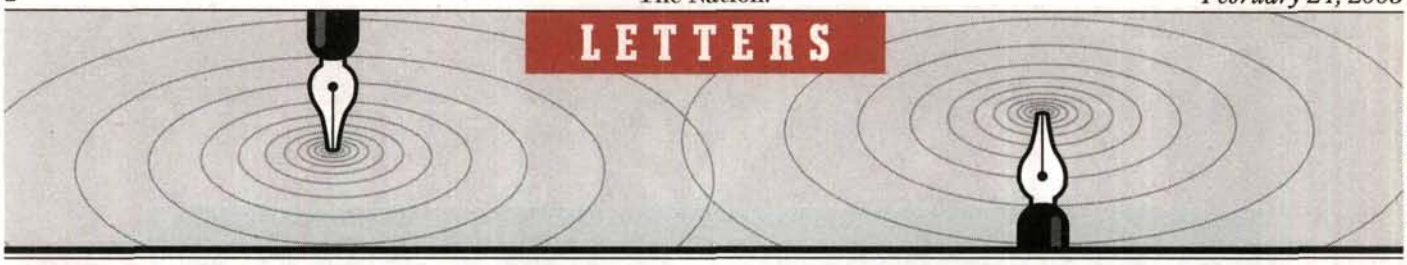

CHRISTOPH NIEMANN

SCURRILOUS ATTACK

New York City

■ Sinan Antoon's attack on Kanan Makiya, "Dissident or Apologist?" [Feb. 3], is scurrilous; its publication reflects badly on *The Nation*'s judgment. Makiya's hope that American intervention will establish democracy in Iraq is, in my view, quixotic. But one has only to read his books to understand that what drives this hope is not support for George W. Bush's imperial ambitions but desperation at the condition of Iraqis and conviction that a successful internal revolt is not possible. And one has only to read his devastating critique of Arab intellectuals' apologias for nationalism, Islamism and authoritarian regimes to understand why he is not particularly popular among his fellow exiles. The Supreme Council for Islamic Revolution in Iraq, whose leader, Mohammad Baqer al-Hakim, Antoon quotes approvingly, is based in and supported by Iran. Evidently Antoon thinks it's progressive to be a fundamentalist, so long as you're against a US war. Unwittingly, he makes Makiya's point. ELLEN WILLIS

ANTOON REPLIES

Cairo

■ Ellen Willis is convinced that most, if not all, Arab intellectuals are apologists for Islamism, nationalism and authoritarianism. In fact, many of those exiled intellectuals who find Makiya's uncritical embrace of American imperialism problematic courageously critiqued political Islam, nationalism and authoritarianism before Makiya decided to make a career out of it.

One wonders why Makiya's compassion is on hold when it comes to the draconian UN/US sanctions exploited by Saddam. One million Iraqis have perished, and he has yet to call for an end to the genocide. I quoted al-Hakim to show that, unlike Makiya, not all Iraqis are fantasizing about a US occupation. I do not approve or disapprove of Teheran as a location for al-Hakim's headquarters. Not all Iraqi dissidents could make it to the United States in the late 1970s. Finally, a number of opposition factions who'd be categorized by Willis as "fundamentalist" are supported by the United States and are for the war. I guess being pro-war makes the fundamentalists progressive as well! SINAN ANTOON

NO DEAD MAN WALKING

Paducah, Ky.

■ Illinois Governor Ryan's historic pardons may not exonerate him in other areas of his gubernatorial term, but they certainly identify him as a surprisingly courageous prophet and man of compassionate justice.

Bruce Shapiro ["Ryan's Courage," Feb. 3] is correct to say that the governor's courage forever changes death penalty politics, not only in Illinois but in the nation. If the governor of Illinois can be courageous first, then what is to keep other governors from following? Ryan's benchmark decisions and actions against the death penalty may well be seen in the not too distant future as the straw that broke the camel's back, as Americans in increasing numbers prefer alternatives to the death penalty. Can politicians, even other compassionate conservatives, be far behind? FR. DAN KREUTZER

INCOHERENCE AT *THE NATION*

New York City

■ "Axis of Incoherence" [Jan. 27] is the best account I have seen of how the Korean crisis developed. But where did you get the cockamamie idea that the solution lies in "stronger nonproliferation agreements"? As Jonathan Schell has made perfectly clear to *Nation* readers, nonproliferation is a snare and a delusion and a prescription for keeping the rest of the world permanently at the mercy of the nuclear-armed powers, led by the United States. On May 20, 2000, at the conclusion of the quinquennial review of the NPT, those powers agreed to "an unequivocal undertaking to accomplish the total elimination of their nuclear arsenals." Now we have a different President, who believes we must not leave the worst weapons in the hands of the worst countries, while we increasingly rattle our nukes—responsibly, of course.

PETER WEISS, *president*
Lawyers Committee on Nuclear Policy

PICTURE OF CHÁVEZ—TOO ROSY

Caracas, Venezuela

■ Steve Ellner's "Venezuela on the Brink" [Jan. 13/20] is full of misrepresentations of the opposition, while presenting a rosy picture of Hugo Chávez and his government. He has obviously not been marching in the massive protests calling for "Elections Now!," because he mistakenly says that baseball hero Andres Galarraga's plea for peace "reflects the conviction among the nation's 50 percent who are neither pro-government nor pro-opposition that Venezuela is on the brink of civil war." In cities like Caracas people are marching as well as banging on pots and pans daily in numbers approaching a million and a half. Where is Ellner getting a 50 percent who are disinterested? To be in some sort of middle is no longer possible.

Ellner does not mention the sort of things the president and his ministers are doing to buy support, particularly among the military. The government has been paying money to those who join Bolivarian circles—often jobless people from the poorer areas. Military officers, in some cases with shady credentials, are suddenly promoted—rumors abound about the money and loans they are receiving. Let's be clear about what has alienated the middle class: not Chávez's "rhetoric favoring the poor over the 'privileged.'" We, the middle class, the "privileged," are alienated by the amazing inefficiencies of a government riddled with corruption, a corruption that ironically Chávez criticized vociferously before he was elected. In 1998 many supported him or at least gave him the benefit of the doubt. But he grew bold, with public accusations against those who questioned anything he did or said. Day after day we have had to endure rhetoric imbued with insults and violence pushing for social polarization.

Ellner portrays the opposition as privileged people who oppose a leader truly working for needed economic and social reforms. The opposition is not against reform in general but outrageous specific land reforms and the way they were passed. Chávez's achievements in four years are minuscule even in the eyes of many who initially supported him. And there is consensus among Venezuelans that economic and social reforms are urgent.

Ellner also makes the opposition seem unreasonable in their demand for "Elections Now!" One only need examine what Chávez has been doing this past year to feel skepticism about his really going through a recall election in August. PATRICIA MÁRQUEZ

ELLNER REPLIES

Caracas, Venezuela

■ I fully disagree with Patricia Márquez (who contributed a chapter to the book I co-edited, *Venezuelan Politics in the Chávez Era*) that adherence to a critical position toward both Chávez and the nation's opposition "is no longer possible" in Venezuela. To the contrary, a large part of the population objects to Chávez's failure to move against corruption but certainly does not support an opposition that decrees the suspension of the Christmas holidays and for two months cuts off the nation's economic lifeline, boasts of its capacity to shut down schools and banks, and forces people to wait in endless lines for gasoline.

Márquez implies that those in the middle class who march against the Chávez government represent the thinking of the nation's majority, whereas the poor, who form the backbone of Chávez's movement, are being bribed into

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EDITORIALS

In Dubya's Battle

Although the Bush Administration acts as if the war train has already left the station, the antiwar forces continue to grow, and they are mobilizing in large numbers for a worldwide protest on February 15. The Administration took comfort in statements by eight European leaders—conservatives of varying stripes—and by ten East European leaders backing a US war on Iraq. Yet polls show high and increasing opposition on the Continent to war. In this country, as of early February, sixty-six cities, towns and counties and two state legislatures (Maine and Hawaii) have passed antiwar resolutions.

George W. Bush's State of the Union address reversed the recent slippage in Americans' support for war, but such temporary spikes are inevitable on these flag-wrapped, tradition-drenched occasions. As if in rebuttal to the parade of deceit and false piety in Bush's address, two respected elder statesmen and Nobel Peace Prize winners spoke out. Nelson Mandela, founding father of postapartheid South Africa, loosed a verbal volley at the President: "All Bush wants is Iraqi oil.... We have not had world wars in fifty-seven years, and it is because of the United Nations.... Bush is now undermining the United Nations.... I am happy that the people of the world—especially those of the United States of America—are standing up and opposing their own President." Former President Carter said that even if Secretary of State Colin Powell's Security Council presentation proved trickery and deceit by Iraq, "this will not indicate any real or proximate threat by Iraq to the United States or to our allies." He called for a "sustained and enlarged inspection team, deployed as a permanent entity." The cost "would be minuscule compared to war."

After his well-timed conversion to the hard line, at Davos, Switzerland, Powell's militant Security Council presentation on February 5 came as an anticlimax. Expectations had been lowered in advance ("no smoking guns"), thus allowing the Bush Administration to frame the terms of proof. Powell dumped on the table an avalanche of evidence, old and new, hoping to bury all the doubters and antiwar skeptics. There were satellite photos of trucks, purporting to show that known chemical weapons sites had been "sanitized," and intercepts of radio chatter—supposedly between Iraqi officers planning to conceal weapons. The multimedia show went on for over an hour with Powell acting as guide, telling the Council members how the evidence was to be interpreted. But for all its magnitude, the point of the presentation was to make the case for war. It boiled down to a simple message: "Forget the inspections process; it's a loser. Forget Hans Blix telling you he has found no persuasive evidence of things I allege, such as Iraq hiding WMD material or using mobile weapons labs. Accept *our* evidence. Just trust us. Follow *our* urgent timetable for war."

When the smoke cleared, Carter's objection held: No case had been made that Iraq poses a "real or proximate threat" justifying preventive war. Powell failed to prove that war, with all the suffering and instability it would bring, is superior to the alternative—tough containment working through the UN. The Security Council doubters stayed convinced that inspections should continue, and the gulf between the United States and Europe widened.

The real point of the Security Council exercise was, as former Secretary of State Alexander Haig cynically wrote in the *Wall Street Journal*, to give the members "good covering reasons *other than U.S. orders* to justify a vote" for war. [Emphasis added.] In other words, Powell's job was to hand out fig leaves.

Opposition to conflict is muted in Congress, but peace groups

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COMMENT

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and all citizens who believe this war is unnecessary should make known their support for the Kennedy-Byrd resolution in the Senate calling for another vote before sending US forces against Iraq. In the House, the DeFazio/Paul bill would repeal last October's use-of-force resolution and co-chair of the Progressive Caucus Dennis Kucinich is trying to raise the issue of the war's estimated $200 billion price tag with a bill imposing a tax on oil companies' windfall profits to pay for it.

The peace forces lack national leaders to unify and amplify their message. But the people are speaking, organizing, protesting. We await the emergence of the leaders who will follow them.

COMMENT

Bush's Big Bad Budget

George W. Bush's budget sketches the precipitous decline in our fortunes on his watch, while blurring the full costs of his shameless pander to privilege. In two years, we have fallen from a projected surplus of $5.6 trillion over ten years to a projected deficit of $2.1 trillion. We've gone from fretting about paying off the national debt too quickly to racking up another trillion in interest costs while squandering the entire Social Security surplus. Bush blames "a recession and a war we did not choose" for this decline. September 11 has changed everything, we are told, and the President puts the war on terrorism and defending the "homeland" above all other priorities.

That is a baldfaced lie. September 11 transformed everything except Bush's passionate commitment to erasing taxes on the wealthy. Of the nearly $8 trillion decline in the federal fiscal position, fully $4.4 trillion derives from his tax cuts. Bush prescribes tax breaks for the affluent when the economy is in surplus and when it is in deficit, when it is growing and when it is faltering. He now proposes reforms that will essentially exempt the unearned income of the wealthy from taxation, raising the burden on those who must work to earn their income. Those tax-exempt fortunes are to be free of estate taxes also, so that the wealth may be passed from generation to generation. This son of privilege is committed, above all else, to serving his class, and this takes precedence over everything else. As one example, Bush recently had his minions in Congress vote down spending on such "homeland security" priorities as strengthening our ports or defending nuclear power plants. The French defend their nuclear plants with antiaircraft batteries, but we won't afford it.

Bush proposes a record $307 billion deficit in his $2.2 trillion budget for next year, but with the global economy on the verge of deflation, a larger figure might well be in order to jump-start the economy—if it were to be spent on building schools, cleaning up toxic wastes and other vital public works programs that put people to work. Instead, Bush lards on high-end tax cuts that will have little short-term impact and will sap revenues and add debt in later years just as the nation must deal with the retirement of the baby boomers. The military budget will hit $400 billion, but that doesn't count the cost of actually waging the "war on terrorism"—either in Afghanistan or Iraq. Even so, military spending

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is $70 billion more than two years ago, and 13 percent higher than the average expenditure during the cold war. Then we faced a global menace; now, we stand alone, threatened more, according to the President's national security statements, by "failed states" and the "embittered few" than by any global adversary. Despite this, the Pentagon is forced to retire planes and ships early. They can't be afforded because of the staggering costs of baroque cold war weapons that the Administration continues to fund in an arms race with itself. The largest single item in the military budget is $9 billion for developing and deploying missile defense—a weapon that doesn't work, against a threat that doesn't exist.

"Homeland security" gets only a marginal boost above last year's budget, while the remaining parts of the discretionary budget will force cuts in current services. With states in fiscal crisis, there is no significant help for schools. With university costs soaring, Pell grants and loans won't keep up. Environmental programs will continue to be eviscerated, with clean water taking the biggest hit. There will be fewer cops on the street. Naturally, the poor are the first to suffer: Empowerment zones and brownfield redevelopment are eliminated, and community development and housing are cut. It will be harder for poor children to get school lunches. The IRS is instructed to turn its attention from the privileged to the working poor seeking tax credits. Rather than help states with soaring Medicaid costs, the President empowers them to cut services and to cut people from coverage.

The bulk of the cost of the Bush tax cuts, however, will be levied against healthcare and Social Security in the future. The budget doesn't reveal Bush's plans to privatize Medicare and Social Security. But by racking up deficits as far as the eye can see, he sets them up for a big hit.

This shadowy and dishonest budget does reveal just how radical and how obscene Bush's priorities are. In his hunger to free corporations from accountability and feed the Pentagon while starving the rest of government and freeing corporations from regulation, he resembles Ronald Reagan. But in his mania about tax cuts for the wealthy, he makes even Reagan look wobbly. Adam Smith once wrote that there's a great deal of ruin in a civilization. If the President has his way, we are about to test just how much ruin there is.

ROBERT L. BOROSAGE

Robert L. Borosage is the co-director of the Campaign for America's Future (www.ourfuture.org).

Resist War and Empire

With up to 200,000 American and British combat troops already stationed in or on their way to the Persian Gulf area, war with Iraq looks increasingly imminent. This war can still be stopped, but the antiwar movement should begin planning for what it must do if it is not. The next step is to expand the movement into a permanent opposition to the Administration's imperial design.

The very imminence of war has already galvanized the US peace movement. Hundreds of thousands of Americans from widely diverse backgrounds participated in antiwar rallies in Washington, San Francisco and other cities on January 18, and many lobbied Congress in the days that followed. New groups and coalitions—MoveOn, United for Peace & Justice, Win Without War and others like them—have emerged in recent months to oppose war in Iraq and to organize new peace demonstrations, such as the mass rallies planned for February 15 in New York City and February 16 in San Francisco (for more information, see "No War With Iraq" at www.thenation.com).

The next weeks are crucial. As long as there is any chance of averting war, the antiwar movement must do all it can to increase the odds for peace, through mass protest, petitioning, lobbying, media work and other forms of action. This is essential both on moral grounds, to stress the illegitimacy of pre-emptive military action as a solution to international problems, and on political grounds, to build a nationwide constituency that can oppose the subsequent abuse of military power.

Yet for all our efforts, the likelihood of war with Iraq erupting in the next few weeks remains high. If it comes, war will pose an enormous challenge to the American peace movement. War will mark the beginning of its work, not the end.

The Bush Administration sees the coming conflict as the first step in a much larger campaign aimed at the political and economic transformation of Iraq and the surrounding region under US supervision. US troops are likely to remain in Iraq for a very long time—first to insure the installation and survival of a friendly regime and then to coerce other states in the region into obeying Washington's dictates. They will, in other words, serve as imperial occupiers. This means that the American peace movement must assume a historic role of unprecedented scale and character: It must build the foundation for a long-term campaign against a permanent imperial US presence in the Middle East and the permanent militarization of American society.

As the battle rages, the peace movement must speak out against the use of tactics and weapons by either side that will result in the indiscriminate slaughter of civilians. In particular, it must condemn air and missile attacks on populated areas of Baghdad by US forces, and the possible use of chemical and biological weapons by Saddam Hussein in a last-ditch effort to inflict high casualties on the invaders. And it should demand that the United States cooperate with the United Nations, the International Committee of the Red Cross and other relief agencies to address the humanitarian crisis that war would bring.

Once the fighting is over, another struggle will begin. The peace movement should be prepared to call for the immediate relief of civilians in need; the repair of essential infrastructure (roads, hospitals, power stations and so on); the rapid installation of a representative, democratically inclined Iraqi government; and the speedy replacement of US combat troops by a multinational peacekeeping force. We must not allow the obvious requirement for some sort of security presence in Iraq to be used as the justification for turning Iraq into a permanent US garrison.

Finally, and most important, the peace movement must prepare itself to conduct a long-term struggle against the Administration's imperial designs in the gulf. These plans must be exposed for what they are: a classic appropriation of political power and material goods (especially petroleum) by military

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force masquerading as a campaign for democracy.

Not that we oppose the spread of genuine democracy, but we must oppose any democratizing project based on US economic interests and sustained by US military power—a project that is certain to provoke anger, resistance and violence around the world, not to mention an increased risk of terrorism at home. Most of all, it is likely to hasten the transformation of this country into an undemocratic, soulless warfare state.

As we move closer to the abyss, we begin to glimpse our historic mission: to envision and promote a peaceful, non-imperial future in which the United States cooperates with other states in constructing robust international institutions capable of resisting aggression, averting global environmental catastrophe and protecting the rights of all. MICHAEL T. KLARE

Michael T. Klare, The Nation*'s defense correspondent, is a professor of peace and world security studies at Hampshire College.*

Bush and AIDS

George W. Bush's surprise State of the Union announcement of $10 billion in new funding for the global AIDS crisis was masterful, lending an air of humanitarian internationalism to his bellicose foreign policy. The White House, however, offered scant information on its Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief, and the all-important details will have to be worked out by Congress in the weeks ahead. In the meantime, AIDS activists responded with a mixture of guarded optimism and suspicion, and rightly so. Bush's announcement does mark a significant shift, for the first time embracing treatment as a viable and legitimate goal, as well as, apparently, the use of generic drugs. But for Bush's words to translate into an effective AIDS plan, the Administration will have to reverse course on a number of its policies.

Of primary concern is the Administration's record of duplicity on AIDS funding. As Africa Action director Salih Booker points out, the White House uses "Arthur Andersen–style accounting methods, counting old money several times and using projections for sums that don't yet exist" when announcing "new" aid packages. Indeed, according to the *Wall Street Journal*, Bush's "budget for 2004 would reduce by about the same amount the funding that aides had said would be sought for a separate development-aid initiative for poor nations." Moreover, Bush's new funding is spread over five years and begins in 2004 with only a modest increase over prior levels—less than what was authorized by the Frist-Kerry bill, which passed the Senate last year only to be scuttled by the White House.

This isn't the first AIDS smoke-and-mirrors ploy from this Administration. In June Bush announced to great fanfare a $500 million initiative to reduce mother-to-child HIV transmission in Africa. But just weeks earlier he had personally intervened to reduce the mother-to-child funds in a bill sponsored by, of all people, Jesse Helms. The treatment-access group Health GAP reports that this initiative has yet to receive any funding and is tied up in budget negotiations.

Equally troubling is Bush's decision to bypass the multilateral Global Fund, instead earmarking 90 percent of new funding for bilateral aid agreements with fourteen African and Caribbean countries. Bush's announcement couldn't have come at a more critical time for the fund. Having just awarded $866 million in its second round of grants, the fund reports that it "lacks the resources to approve a third round of proposals." According to the fund's Anil Soni, it needs at least $6.3 billion over the next two years. AIDS activists have called on the United States to contribute $2.5 billion of that sum, but the Administration plan offers a mere $200 million a year. Bush's unilateralism and parsimony are all the more puzzling, since within days of his speech, Health and Human Services Secretary Tommy Thompson was appointed the fund's chair, putting him in charge of fundraising. Thompson's elevation is at odds with Bush's rebuff of the fund, but Asia Russell of Health GAP says it creates some leverage for activists. "Thompson is making a commitment as a public health official to devote energy and resources to combat the greatest health crisis of our time, and we're going to hold him to his words in terms of policy and funding."

At best, Bush's plan creates a parallel and redundant funding mechanism that will compete with the Global AIDS Fund. At worst it will be modeled after existing USAID programs, opening the door for right-wing and Big Pharma lobbyists, who will pressure Bush to renege on his pledge to include generics and condoms in treatment and prevention programs, both of which are standard elements of Global Fund grants. As recently as this past December, US delegates blocked a WTO plan to allow developing countries to import generics for national medical emergencies, and USAID currently has a buy-American-only policy that will have to be revised or evaded if Bush truly intends to purchase generics with US dollars.

Also of note, this past summer Bush stripped the UN Population Fund (UNFPA) of $34 million at the request of Republican House members who alleged that UNFPA supported coerced abortions in China—which UNFPA denies—and then shifted that funding to USAID. Many of the same lawmakers also wanted to deny USAID funding to the Population Council for not using abstinence-based HIV prevention programs. Right-wing abstinence groups, including those federally funded by Bush's domestic abstinence-until-marriage program, have taken a keen interest in prevention programs in Africa. They single out abstinence education as the key reason for Uganda's significant reduction of HIV incidence rates. However, Uganda's prevention program combines abstinence and behavior change with con-

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Doug Henwood toasts King Charles I of England with the Party of the Right on the occasion of its 50th anniversary; Miranda Kennedy looks at a very successful community radio project in rural Western India; February's Death Row Roll Call tells how you can help abolish capital punishment in the United States; Dr. Marc answers his biweekly batch of questions on medicine, politics and profiteering.

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COMMENT

doms, and the most comprehensive data suggest that all three were responsible for lower HIV rates and that abstinence was a negligible factor for those already sexually active.

The fight against global AIDS now turns to Congress, where presidential hopeful John Kerry and Senate majority leader Bill Frist are among the key players. They, along with Congressional Democrats and sympathetic Republicans, must be pressed to insure that Bush's rhetoric becomes reality—and starts by appropriating real money to advance public health, not a political agenda.

RICHARD KIM

Richard Kim is a doctoral candidate in the American Studies program at New York University.

Columbia Down

Like the perennial quest for a "Star Wars" antimissile system, the space shuttle has never been an entirely rational program. At heart, after decades of debate about cost effectiveness and safety, it is a litmus-test expression of faith for its many supporters. That it also happens to be a major meal ticket for the aerospace industry—a profitable child of the cold war that cannot exist without steady government spending on military and "civilian" hardware (which are inseparable)—means that all Americans are on board for every launch whether they believe in it or not.

One salient point on which debate ought to be over by now, because public records are chock-full of conclusive legal and legislative evidence, is that the aerospace-government complex that makes the shuttle possible is prone to profound errors of both technical and financial scope. After the Apollo 1 fire killed three astronauts during a ground test in January 1967, NASA managers and North American Aviation executives scrambled to blame each other for filling the capsule with pure, exceedingly flammable oxygen. After the Challenger disaster killed seven more in January 1986, NASA engaged in a similar fracas with Morton Thiokol over the shuttle's leaky solid-rocket boosters. Now, in anticipation of huge liability awards, the value of shares in several major aerospace companies has plummeted.

At least on this civilian side of the business, the public can hope to see eventually a bit of what went wrong behind bureaucratic curtains. On the military side, secrecy blankets technical errors and old-fashioned financial fraud among the colonels and the contractors. There is no shortage of experts from inside and outside government who appear year after year before Congress to warn about how dangerous the shuttle is, about what a fiscal quagmire it is, about how the juncture between public and private interest is inherently laced with conflict. One need only consider that NASA was planning to send another schoolteacher up on the shuttle this year (though nothing about the basic risks of the system had changed in the seventeen years since they lost Christa McAuliffe) to understand that these respectful critics are routinely ignored.

Simply put, the shuttle is a killer. So are airplanes and automobiles, yes, but at nowhere near the rate of this machine. It may or may not have been a noble experiment, but there is no doubt that it would never have been built in the first place if engineers and politicians had honestly contemplated the prospect that it might slaughter its passengers every fifty or so rides. No disrespect is paid to the astronauts, their families or anyone else in the history of space flight by broaching this. The "right stuff" now consists of the courage to admit that the shuttle was a mistake and that unmanned exploration of space may have to suffice for now.

Richard Feynman, the Nobel Prize–winning physicist who served on the Challenger investigation, wondered, "What is the cause of management's fantastic faith in the machinery?" in his appendix to the panel's final report. Former Secretary of State William Rogers, who chaired that inquiry, later called Feynman an "iconoclast" who "wasn't a team player." True enough, thank goodness, because it was the zany professor from Cal Tech who dared demonstrate for the TV cameras with a glass of ice water and a chunk of rubber exactly how the shuttle's O-ring seals stiffened and failed on that frigid Florida morning. "Let us make recommendations to insure that NASA officials deal in a world of reality," he pleaded. "For a successful technology, reality must take precedence over public relations, for Nature cannot be fooled."

Nature now demands that the shuttle be permanently grounded.

WAYNE BIDDLE

Wayne Biddle wrote one of the first investigatory critiques of the shuttle program for The New York Times Magazine *in June 1980.*

CALVIN TRILLIN

We Speak Not of Osama

(With apologies to Cole Porter, the master, who wrote "My Heart Belongs to Daddy")

The towers fell. We knew full well
The villain in this awful drama.
His name held sway, till he got away.
Now we speak not of Osama.

We said we'd pound him once he's found
So flat he'd cry for his momma.
Forget that jive, that "dead or alive,"
'Cause we speak not of Osama.

He's not even in the axis.
No, his evil did not make the grade.
For the thing that he mostly lacks is
A country that we can invade.

He could be in Yokohama,
Or Bahrain or Belize or Dubai.
But to get back at Osama
We'll just pulverize some other guy.

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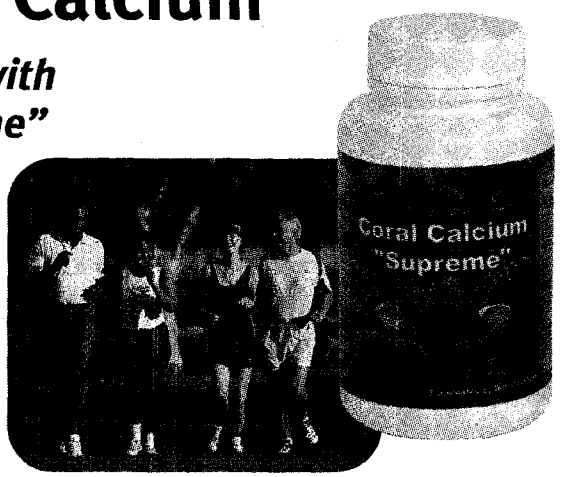
Warning: The Average American Diet is Dangerously Low in Calcium

Build Stronger, Healthier Bones Fast with Bob Barefoot's Coral Calcium "Supreme"



If you're anything like most Americans, you're not getting enough calcium and that could be dangerous to your health. You've probably heard about the many ways calcium helps our aging bodies. You may have even heard about the importance of getting more calcium, and that up to 20 million of us are at risk for osteoperosis. Without a sufficient amount, we could end up with brittle bones, degenerative diseases, or even worse. Research repeatedly shows that there is a significant link between a persons general health and the level of calcium intake in the body. Unfortunately for us, the American diet is notorious for it's lack of beneficial calcium. To stay healthy and avoid the risks, doctors recommend taking at least 1300mg of calcium a day, but most of us get only about half that amount. Which calcium supplement should you take? The answer is Coral Calcium Supreme.

The Natural Secret Used by Over 8 Million Japanese

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The discovery of this naturally occurring source of calcium came about when research professionals took a look at lifespans across the globe and found that the people living in Okinawa, Japan were living healthier, longer lives. The concentration of calcium in coral reefs off the coast was unlike anywhere else in the world. The Coral there contained a 2:1 ratio of calcium to magnesium content. The water there filtered through the sand created from the reef, which helped to create calcium rich foods. The composition was found to be easily absorbed by the body. Coral Calcium was found to offer a naturally balanced combination of calcium, magnesium and over 70 trace minerals.

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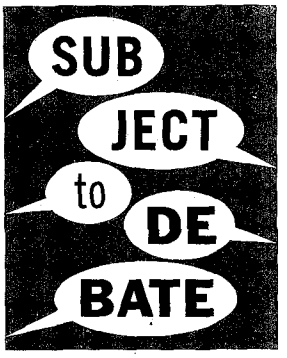
KATHA POLLITT

Poetry Makes Nothing Happen? Ask Laura Bush



So Laura Bush will not, after all, be discussing the works of Emily Dickinson, Walt Whitman and Langston Hughes with a selected group of American poets at the White House on February 12. The conference, "Poetry and the American Voice," was abruptly "postponed" after Sam Hamill, editor of Copper Canyon Press and author of thirteen books of verse, responded to his invitation by putting out an e-mail urging invitees and others to send him poems and statements opposing the invasion of Iraq. When I spoke to him on the phone, Hamill described himself as a lifelong radical ("What on earth were they thinking?" he wondered out loud), and said he had planned to decline his invitation but had hoped to compile an anthology that another invitee would present to the First Lady. Within days almost 2,000 poets had responded to his plea. It was almost like old times, when Robert Lowell refused to attend a poetry symposium at the Johnson White House to protest the Vietnam War.

Why was the conference canceled? Hamill expresses himself rather forcefully ("I was overcome by a kind of nausea," he wrote of finding the invitation in the mail)—in fact, he sounds a lot like writers of letters to *The Nation*. But he didn't urge poets to take off their clothes and pee in the punch bowl, or to stage a reading of the Not In Our Name statement. He merely suggested giving the First Lady some poems. Poets these days are a mannerly crowd, and it's a safe bet that those who chose to attend would have been polite. Marilyn Nelson, poet laureate of Connecticut, said she planned to wear a silk scarf decorated with peace symbols, in hopes of attracting the First Lady's eye. So is that it? The White House, so bold to make war, is afraid of poems and scarves?

So much for democracy, free speech, vigorous discussion. In this most insulated and choreographed of administrations, the "American voice"—note the singular—is welcome only when it says what the White House wants to hear. And yet, as so often, censorship backfired. "They did us an extraordinary favor," Hamill told me. "They revealed that there are many, many poets opposed to the Bush regime. And they demonstrated their fear of the carefully chosen word—their fear of poetry."

Now Laura Bush, a former librarian, likes to read, and that's good. As Texas First Lady she helped start the Texas Book Fair, and as First Lady she has held a number of symposia on interesting historical topics—women writers of the West, the Harlem Renaissance and Mark Twain, whom she calls the "first real American writer," so eat your heart out Bradstreet, Edwards, Franklin, Irving, Douglass, Emerson, Thoreau (especially you, Henry, you civilly disobedient antiwar tree-hugger, you). To her credit, she invited to these gatherings serious writers and scholars—Arnold Rampersad, Justin Kaplan, David Levering Lewis, frontier historian Ursula Smith—who she must have known could not, on the whole, be happy with her husband's policies. Still, according to press reports, invitees to these events arrived suspicious, went away charmed. That's how it usually works with the presidency—Bill Clinton beguiled an entire roomful of poets at a 1998 soiree, with only a few refuseniks. Proximity to power, a brush with history, the cachet of exclusivity and, in the case of Laura Bush, a private glimpse of perhaps the biggest contrast-gainer in the history of marriage—say what you like about the irrelevance of poets in today's world, if they're willing to forgo all that, antiwar feeling must be positively rampaging across the land.

"There is nothing political about American literature," Laura Bush has said. But it would be hard to find writers more subversive than the three she chose for her event. Whitman's epic of radical democracy, *Leaves of Grass*, was so scandalous it got him fired from his government job; Hughes, a Communist sympathizer hounded by McCarthy, wrote constantly and indelibly about racism, injustice, power; Dickinson might seem the least political, but in some ways she was the most lastingly so—every line she wrote is an attack on complacency and conformity of manners, mores, religion, language, gender, thought. None of these quintessentially American writers would have given two cents for family values (Whitman was gay, as perhaps were Hughes and Dickinson), abstinence education, the death penalty, tax cuts for the rich, Ashcroftian attacks on civil liberties or the other hallmarks of the Bush regime. It's hard to imagine them cheering the bombing of Baghdad.

There will be readings all over the country on February 12. As of this writing some 3,500 poets (who knew?) have sent poems and statements to www.poetsagainstthewar.org. Here's mine:

TRYING TO WRITE A POEM AGAINST THE WAR

My daughter, who's as beautiful as the day,
hates politics: Face it, Ma,
they don't care what you think! All
passion, like Achilles,
she stalks off to her room,
to confide in her purple guitar and await
life's embassies. She's right,
of course: bombs will be hurled
at ordinary streets
and leaders look grave for the cameras,
and what good are more poems against war
the real subject of which
so often seems to be the poet's superior
moral sensitivities? I could
be mailing myself to the moon
or marrying a palm tree,
and yet what can we do
but offer what we have?
and so I spend
this cold gray glittering morning
trying to write a poem against war
that perhaps may please my daughter
who hates politics
and does not care much for poetry, either. ■

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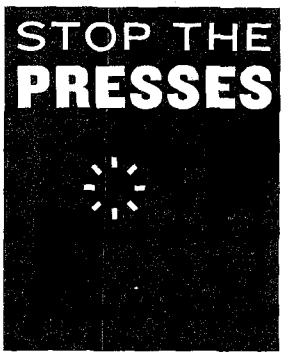
ERIC ALTERMAN

A 'Good Man' Is Not So Hard to Find



I was standing in line for *Bowling for Columbine* in Brussels not long ago with two writer/editor friends, when a 15-or-so-year-old Belgian boy in front of us turned around and inquired, "Excuse me, are you Americans?" Given his typical-American-teenager looks, we figured he had a question about Michael Moore, or perhaps Michael Jordan or even Michael Jackson. Instead, he asked, "Do you support attacking Iraq without a second Security Council resolution?" Next up he wanted to know why our "defense minister" had insulted France and Germany by referring to them as "Old Europe" just because they didn't want to "do everything Bush wanted them to do."

Such anecdotes, the fodder of foreign correspondents for centuries, are virtually meaningless as evidence of the views of entire populations, but the young man was on solid ground. My friends and I were attending a meeting sponsored by the Parliamentary Group of the Party of European Socialists. Two things struck me about the discussion at the meeting, which was divided into politicians on the European side—including former prime ministers and spokespersons for parties in and out of power from various NATO nations—and writers/intellectuals on ours. The first was the eloquence of the Europeans. They spoke for that boy, but with a command of the issues that would have made every one of them just about the most articulate member of Congress, save perhaps Barney Frank. (And most of them in English, too.) The second was that they spoke their minds without fear that their words would be twisted to imply that they were "soft" on terrorism, crime, pornography, child kidnapping or whatever the prevailing bugaboo might be in the US media. They could afford to be subtle.

Things are different, to say the least, over here. I have been a consistent proponent of the view that George Bush is often only pretending to be a moron, but the fact that he can (almost) get elected even pretending is painfully telling. For the second time in just over two decades, the nation is represented by a President whose knowledge of history, economics, sociology, political science, etc. would not get him through freshman courses at our best universities. (Insert rich white-guy affirmative-action joke here.)

If you take a careful look at Bush's State of the Union address, as the folks at www.liberaloasis.com did, you will see that the entire thing collapses as a mountain of gibberish at the slightest examination. The *Washington Post* coverage of the speech described as its "boldest facet" Bush's proposal to turn federal dollars away from drug treatment centers and toward religious extremists on the model of Marvin Olasky, the ex-Communist, ex-Jewish, conservative Christian proselytizer. Bold? How about lunatic?

And what of Iraq? Michael Kinsley, who has apparently cornered much of the franchise on logic among respectable pundits, quotes some of the Saddam Hussein horror stories Bush offered in support of his obsession with invading Iraq and wonders just what their purpose might be. After all, we are not about to invade Iraq because of human rights violations. The idea was supposed to be that Hussein plus weapons of mass destruction plus (someday) nukes represented an unacceptable security threat. But "what happens," Kinsley asks, "if Hussein decides to meet all our demands regarding weapons and inspections? Is he then free to torture children and pour acid on innocent citizens without fear of the United States?"

And don't forget—just because Bush did—Saddam's "Axis of Evil" sidekick, nuclear-armed North Korea. When Bush advises us to "learn the lessons of the Korean Peninsula and not allow an even greater threat to rise up in Iraq," he appears to be arguing that we should have invaded them too, back when we had the chance. "But as Bush sets it out," Kinsley notes, "the 'lesson' of Korea seems to be that if you don't go to war soon enough, you might have a problem years later that can be solved through regional discussions. That doesn't sound so terrible, frankly." Again, parse a single sentence and Bush might as well be speaking pig Latin.

Bush greased his path by inviting a few of his media buddies over for a pre-SOTU "background" luncheon. If he did this more often, Ari Fleischer could just play golf every day. Acting White House stenographer (and *Washington Post* columnist) Michael Kelly quoted "a senior Administration official" demonstrating "an iron determination to wage war against Iraq, no matter what, if war is necessary." When Bush again offered the still unproven and apparently false charge that Saddam was operating with Al Qaeda as "part of, and partners in, the war of terror against the United States," Kelly passed it along without changing a comma.

But Kelly sounds like Izzy Stone next to Peggy Noonan. Quoting her "high Administration official with intimate knowledge of the President's thinking," Noonan discovered that the President, "truly, is a good man...courageous...[with a] profound authenticity to him, and a fearlessness too." Heard enough? Tough luck. Bush also has "a steady hand on the helm in high seas, a knowledge of where we must go and why, a resolve to achieve safe harbor. More and more this presidency is feeling like a gift." (Uh, Peggy, it was. Address your thank-you note: United States Supreme Court, Washington, DC.)

My friend and fellow moviegoer Rick Hertzberg attributes the sorry state of just about everything in American politics to the faulty quality of our institutions. If we had the good sense to adopt European styles of proportional representation—coupled with desperately needed campaign finance reform—we would be rewarded with European-quality leaders who could express their values with eloquence and courage, without fear of seeing their words deliberately distorted beyond recognition in order to exploit the ignorance of the average voter. He has a point. But what of the almost complete abdication of responsibility on the part of our permanent political class, including most particularly the punditocracy? What's its excuse?

As apparently any Belgian 15-year-old could tell you, America's "senior Administration official" has no clothes. From much of our media, however, we get little besides fashion reporting. ■

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ARTICLES

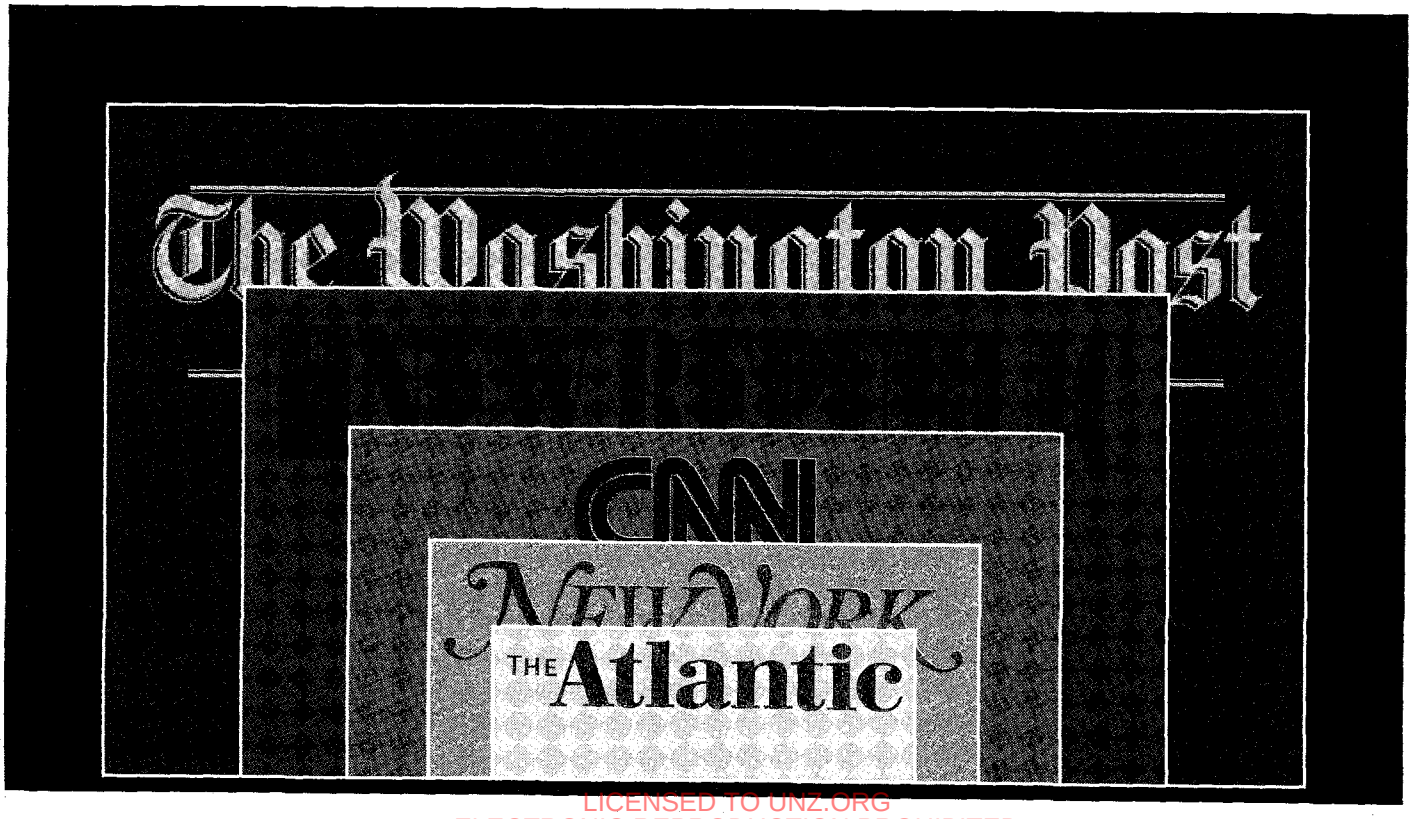
WHAT LIBERAL MEDIA?

by ERIC ALTERMAN

Social scientists talk about "useful myths," stories we all know aren't necessarily true, but that we choose to believe anyway because they seem to offer confirmation of what we already know (which raises the question, If we already know it, why the story?). Think of the wholly fictitious but illustrative story about little George Washington and his inability to lie about that cherry tree. For conservatives, and even many journalists, the "liberal media" is just that—a myth, to be sure, but a useful one.

Republicans of all stripes have done quite well for themselves during the past five decades fulminating about the liberal cabal/progressive thought police who spin, supplant and sometimes suppress the news we all consume. (Indeed, it's not only conservatives who find this whipping boy to be an irresistible target. In late 1993 Bill Clinton whined to *Rolling Stone* that he did not get "one damn bit of credit from the knee-jerk liberal press.") But while some conservatives actually believe their own grumbles, the smart ones don't. They know mau-mauing the other side is just a good way to get their own ideas across—or perhaps prevent the other side from getting a fair hearing for theirs. On occasion, honest conservatives admit this. Rich Bond, then chair of the Republican Party, complained during the 1992 election, "I think we know who the media want to win this election—and I don't think it's George Bush." The very same Rich Bond, however, also noted during the very same election, "There is some strategy to it [bashing the 'liberal' media].... If you watch any great coach, what they try to do is 'work the refs.' Maybe the ref will cut you a little slack on the next one."

Bond is hardly alone. That the media were biased against the Reagan Administration is an article of faith among Republicans. Yet James Baker, perhaps the most media-savvy of them, owned up to the fact that any such complaint was decidedly misplaced. "There were days and times and events we might have had some complaints [but] on balance I don't think we had anything to complain about," he explained to one writer. Patrick Buchanan, among the most conservative pundits and presidential candidates in Republican history, found that he could not identify any allegedly liberal bias against him during his presidential candidacies. "I've gotten balanced coverage, and broad coverage—all we could have asked. For heaven sakes, we kid about the 'liberal media,' but every Republican on earth does that," the aspiring American ayatollah cheerfully confessed during the 1996 campaign. And even William Kristol, without a doubt the most influential Republican/neoconservative publicist in America today, has come clean on this issue. "I admit it," he told a reporter. "The liberal media were never that powerful, and the whole thing was often used as an excuse by conservatives for conservative failures." Nevertheless, Kristol apparently feels no compunction about exploiting and reinforcing the ignorant prejudices of his own constituency. In a 2001 pitch to conservative potential subscribers to his Rupert Murdoch–funded magazine, Kristol complained, "The trouble with politics and political coverage today is that there's too much liberal bias.... There's too much tilt toward the left-wing agenda. Too much apology for liberal policy failures. Too much pandering to liberal candidates and causes." (It's a wonder he left out "Too much hypocrisy.")



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In recent times, the right has ginned up its "liberal media" propaganda machine. Books by both Ann Coulter and Bernard Goldberg have topped the bestseller lists, stringing together a series of charges so extreme that, well, it's amazing neither one thought to accuse "liberals" of using the blood of conservatives' children for extra flavor in their soy-milk decaf lattes.

Given the success of Fox News, the *Wall Street Journal* editorial pages, the *Washington Times*, the *New York Post*, *The American Spectator*, *The Weekly Standard*, the *New York Sun*, *National Review*, *Commentary*, Limbaugh, Drudge, etc., no sensible person can dispute the existence of a "conservative media." The reader might be surprised to learn that neither do I quarrel with the notion of a "liberal media." It is tiny and profoundly underfunded compared with its conservative counterpart, but it does exist. As a columnist for *The Nation* and an independent weblogger for MSNBC.com, I work in the middle of it, and so do many of my friends. And guess what? It's filled with right-wingers.

The right is working the refs. And it's working. The public believes an unsupportable myth about the so-called liberal media.

Unlike most of the publications named above, liberals, for some reason, feel compelled to include the views of the other guy on a regular basis in just the fashion that conservatives abhor. Take a tour from a native: *New York* magazine, in the heart of liberal country, chose as its sole national correspondent the right-wing talk-show host Tucker Carlson. During the 1990s, *The New Yorker*—the bible of sophisticated urban liberalism—chose as its Washington correspondents the belligerent right-winger Michael Kelly and the soft, DLC neoconservative Joe Klein. At least half of the "liberal *New Republic*" is actually a rabidly neoconservative magazine and has been edited in recent years by the very same Michael Kelly, as well as by the conservative liberal-hater Andrew Sullivan. *The Nation* has often opened its pages to liberal-haters, even among its columnists. *The Atlantic Monthly*—a mainstay of Boston liberalism—even chose the apoplectic Kelly as its editor, who then proceeded to add a bunch of *Weekly Standard* writers to its antiliberal stable. What is "liberal" *Vanity Fair* doing publishing a special hagiographic Annie Leibovitz portfolio of Bush Administration officials that appears, at first glance, to be designed (with the help of a Republican political consultant) to invoke notions of Greek and Roman gods? Why does the liberal *New York Observer* alternate *National Review*'s Richard Brookhiser with the Joe McCarthy–admiring columnist Nicholas von Hoffman—both of whom appear alongside editorials that occasionally mimic the same positions taken downtown by the editors of the *Wall Street Journal*? On the web, the tabloid-style liberal website *Salon* gives free rein to the McCarthyite impulses of both Sullivan and David Horowitz. The neoliberal *Slate* also regularly publishes both Sullivan and Christopher Caldwell of *The Weekly Standard*, and has even opened its "pages" to such conservative evildoers as Charles Murray and Elliott Abrams.

Move over to the mainstream publications and broadcasts often labeled "liberal," and you see how ridiculous the notion of liberal dominance becomes. The liberal *New York Times* Op-Ed page features the work of the unreconstructed Nixonite William Safire, and for years accompanied him with the firebreathing-if-difficult-to-understand neocon A.M. Rosenthal. Current denizen Bill Keller also writes regularly from a DLC neocon perspective. The *Washington Post* is just swarming with conservatives, from Michael Kelly to George Will to Robert Novak to Charles Krauthammer. If you wish to include CNN on your list of liberal media—I don't, but many conservatives do—then you had better find a way to explain the near-ubiquitous presence of the attack dog Robert Novak, along with that of neocon virtuecrat William Bennett, *National Review*'s Kate O'Beirne, *National Review*'s Jonah Goldberg, *The Weekly Standard*'s David Brooks and Tucker Carlson. This is to say nothing of the fact that among its most frequent guests are Coulter and the anti-American telepreacher Pat Robertson. Care to include ABC News? Again, I don't, but if you wish, how to deal with the fact that the only ideological commentator on its Sunday show is the hard-line conservative George Will? Or how about the fact that its only explicitly ideological reporter is the journalistically challenged conservative crusader John Stossel? How to explain the entire career there and on NPR of Cokie Roberts, who never met a liberal to whom she could not condescend? What about *Time* and *Newsweek*? In the former, we have Krauthammer holding forth, and in the latter, Will.

I could go on, but the point is clear: Conservatives are extremely well represented in every facet of the media. The correlative point is that even the genuine liberal media are not so liberal. And they are no match—either in size, ferocity or commitment—for the massive conservative media structure that, more than ever, determines the shape and scope of our political agenda.

In a careful 1999 study published in the academic journal *Communications Research*, four scholars examined the use of the "liberal media" argument and discovered a fourfold increase in the number of Americans telling pollsters that they discerned a liberal bias in their news. But a review of the media's actual ideological content, collected and coded over a twelve-year period, offered no corroboration whatever for this view. The obvious conclusion: News consumers were responding to "increasing news coverage of liberal bias media claims, which have been increasingly emanating from Republican Party candidates and officials."

The right is working the refs. And it's working. Much of the public believes a useful but unsupportable myth about the so-called liberal media, and the media themselves have been cowed by conservatives into repeating their nonsensical nostrums virtually nonstop. As the economist/pundit Paul Krugman observes of Republican efforts to bully the media into accepting the party's Orwellian arguments about Social Security privatization: "The next time the administration insists that chocolate is vanilla, much of the media—fearing accusations of liberal bias, trying to create the appearance of 'balance'—won't report that the stuff is actually brown; at best

This article was adapted from Nation *columnist Eric Alterman's* What Liberal Media? The Truth About Bias and the News *(Basic), published in February (www.whatliberalmedia.com).*

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they'll report that some Democrats claim that it's brown."

In the real world of the right-wing media, the pundits are the conservatives' shock troops. Even the ones who constantly complain about alleged liberal control of the media cannot ignore the vast advantage their side enjoys when it comes to airing their views on television, in the opinion pages, on the radio and the Internet.

Take a look at the Sunday talk shows, the cable chat fests, the op-ed pages and opinion magazines, and the radio talk shows. It can be painful, I know, but try it. Across virtually the entire television punditocracy, unabashed conservatives dominate, leaving lone liberals to be beaten up by gangs of marauding right-wingers, most of whom voice views much further toward their end of the spectrum than any regularly televised liberals do toward the left. Grover Norquist, the right's brilliant political organizer, explains his team's advantage by virtue of the mindset of modern conservatism. "The conservative press is self-consciously conservative and self-consciously part of the team," he notes. "The liberal press is much larger, but at the same time it sees itself as the establishment press. So it's conflicted. Sometimes it thinks it needs to be critical of both sides." Think about it. Who among the liberals can be counted upon to be as ideological, as relentless and as nakedly partisan as George Will, Robert Novak, Pat Buchanan, Bay Buchanan, William Bennett, William Kristol, Fred Barnes, John McLaughlin, Charles Krauthammer, Paul Gigot, Oliver North, Kate O'Beirne, Tony Blankley, Ann Coulter, Sean Hannity, Tony Snow, Laura Ingraham, Jonah Goldberg, William F. Buckley Jr., Bill O'Reilly, Alan Keyes, Tucker Carlson, Brit Hume, the self-described "wild men" of the *Wall Street Journal* editorial page, etc., etc.? In fact, it's hard to come up with a single journalist/pundit appearing on television who is even remotely as far to the left of the mainstream spectrum as most of these conservatives are to the right.

Of the prominent liberals writing in newspapers or opinion magazines, not one has ever enjoyed a prominent perch on television.

Liberals are not as rare in the print punditocracy as in television, but their modest numbers nevertheless give the lie to any accusations of liberal domination. Of the most prominent liberals writing in the nation's newspapers and opinion magazines—Garry Wills, E.J. Dionne, Richard Cohen, Robert Kuttner, Robert Scheer, Paul Krugman, Bob Herbert, Mary McGrory, Hendrik Hertzberg, Nicholas Kristof, Molly Ivins—not one enjoys or has ever enjoyed a prominent perch on television. Michael Kinsley did for a while, but only as the liberal half of *Crossfire*'s tag team, and Kinsley, by his own admission, is not all that liberal. The *Weekly Standard* and *National Review* editors enjoy myriad regular television gigs of their own, and are particularly popular as guests on the allegedly liberal CNN. Columnists Mark Shields and Al Hunt also play liberals on television, but always in opposition to conservatives and almost always on the other team's ideological field, given the conservatives' ability to dominate television's "he said, she said" style of argument virtually across the board.

As a result of their domination of the terms of political discourse, conservative assumptions have come to rule the roost of insider debate. And they do so not only because of conservative domination of the punditocracy but also because of conservative colonization of the so-called center—where all action in American politics is deemed to take place.

Consider the case of Howard Kurtz. By virtue of his responsibilities at CNN as host of *Reliable Sources* and at the *Washington Post* as its media reporter and columnist, Kurtz is widely recognized as the most influential media reporter in America, akin to the top cop on the beat. There is no question that Kurtz is a terrifically energetic reporter. But all media writers, including myself, walk a difficult line with regard to conflicts of interest. As a reporter and a wide-ranging talk-show host, Kurtz, unlike a columnist, cannot choose simply to ignore news. What's more, the newspaper for which he writes cannot help but cover CNN, the network on which he appears, and vice versa, as they both constitute 800-pound gorillas in the media jungle. *Post* executive editor Len Downie Jr. says he thinks "the problem is endemic to all media reporters. Everyone in the media universe is a competitor of the *Washington Post*, and so it's impossible to avoid conflicts of interest. Either we tell him the only people he can cover is *The Nation* or we set up this unique rule for him that he has to identify his relationship with whomever he writes about." Downie may be right. But the system didn't work perfectly when Kurtz covered Walter Isaacson's resignation from CNN recently. He wrote a tougher piece on Isaacson than most, which is fine, and noted that he worked for CNN at the end, but did not note that the network brass—meaning, presumably, Isaacson—had just cut his airtime in half. (Kurtz later explained this in an online chat.)

Regarding the political coloration of his work, it is no secret to anyone in the industry that CNN has sought to ingratiate itself with conservatives in recent years as it has lost viewers to Fox. Shortly after taking the reins, in the summer of 2001, Isaacson initiated a number of moves designed to enhance the station's appeal to conservatives, including a high-profile meeting with the Congressional Republican leadership to listen to their concerns. The bias reflected in Kurtz's work at the *Post* and CNN would be consistent with that of a media critic who had read the proverbial writing on the wall.

Whatever his personal ideology may be, it is hard to avoid the conclusion, based on an examination of his work, that Kurtz loves conservatives but has little time for liberals. His overt sympathy for conservatives and their critique of the media is, given the power and influence of his position, not unlike having the police chief in the hands of a single faction of the mob. To take just one tiny example of many in my book *What Liberal Media?*, Kurtz seemed to be working as a summer replacement for Ari Fleischer when Bush's Harken oil shenanigans briefly captured the imagination of the Washington press corps, owing to the perception of a nationwide corporate meltdown during the summer of 2002. Over and over Kurtz demanded of his guests:

"Why is the press resurrecting, like that 7-million-year-old human skull, this thirteen-year-old incident, in which Bush sold some stock in his company Harken Energy?"

"Laura Ingraham, is this the liberal press, in your view, trying to prove that Bush is soft on corporate crime because he once cut corners himself?"

"Regulators concluded he did nothing improper. Now, there

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may be some new details, granted, but this is—is this important enough to suggest, imply or otherwise infer, as the press might be doing, Molly Ivins, that this is somehow in a league with Tyco or WorldCom or Enron?"

"Is there a media stereotype Bush and Cheney, ex-oilmen, ex-CEOs in bed with big business that they can't shake?"

"Are the media unfairly blaming President Bush for sinking stock prices? Are journalists obsessed with Bush and Cheney's business dealings in the oil industry, and is the press turning CEOs into black-hatted villains?"

"If you look at all the negative media coverage, Rich Lowry, you'd think that Bush's stock has crashed along with the market. Is he hurting, or is this some kind of nefarious media creation?"

"And why is that the President's fault? Is it his job to keep stock prices up?"

Kurtz even went so far as to give credence to the ludicrous, Limbaugh-like insistence that somehow Bill Clinton caused the corporate meltdown of the summer of 2002. Kurtz quoted these arguments, noting, "They say, well, he set a bad example for the country. He showed he could lie and get away with it, so is that a reverse kind of 'Let's drag in the political figure we don't like and pin the tail on him?'" It was, as his guest Martha Brant had to inform him, "a ridiculous argument," surprising Kurtz, who asked again, "You're saying there's no parallel?" Recall that this is the premier program of media criticism hosted by the most influential media reporter in America. It did not occur to Kurtz to note, for instance, as Peter Beinart did, that Clinton vetoed the 1995 bill that shielded corporate executives from shareholder lawsuits (when every single Republican voted to override him), or that Clinton's Securities and Exchange Commission chief wanted to ban accounting firms from having consulting contracts with the firms they were also auditing. Thirty-three of thirty-seven members of Congress who signed their names to protests against the Clinton SEC were also Republican. The man who led the effort was then-lobbyist Harvey Pitt, whom George W. Bush chose to head the SEC and who was later forced to resign. But to Kurtz it is somehow a legitimate, intelligent question whether Clinton's lying about getting blowjobs in the Oval Office was somehow responsible for the multibillion-dollar corporate accounting scandal his Administration sought to prevent.

The current historical moment in journalism is hardly a happy one. Journalists trying to do honest work find themselves under siege from several sides simultaneously. Corporate conglomerates increasingly view journalism as "software," valuable only insofar as it contributes to the bottom line. In the mad pursuit for audience and advertisers, the quality of the news itself becomes degraded, leading journalists to alternating fits of self-loathing and self-pity. Meanwhile, they face an Administration with a commitment to secrecy unmatched in modern US history. And to top it all off, conservative organizations and media outlets lie in wait, eager to pounce on any journalist who tries to give voice to almost any uncomfortable truth about influential American institutions—in other words, to behave as an honest reporter—throwing up the discredited but nevertheless effective accusation of "liberal bias" in order to protect the powerful from scrutiny.

If September 11 taught the nation anything at all, it should have taught us to value the work that honest journalists do for the sake of a better-informed society. But for all the alleged public-spiritedness evoked by September 11, the mass public proved no more interested in serious news—much less international news—on September 10, 2002, than it had been a year earlier. This came as a grievous shock and disappointment to many journalists, who interpreted the events of September 11 as an endorsement of the importance of their work to their compatriots. And indeed, from September 11 through October, according to the Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, 78 percent of Americans followed news of the attacks closely. But according to a wide-ranging study by Peyton Craighill and Michael Dimock, interest in terrorism and fear of future terrorist attacks have "not necessarily translated into broader public interest in news about local, national, or international events.... Reported levels of reading, watching and listening to the news are not markedly different than in the spring of 2000," the report found. "At best, a slightly larger percentage of the public is expressing general interest in international and national news, but there is no evidence its appetite for international news extends much beyond terrorism and the Middle East." In fact, 61 percent of Americans admitted to tuning out foreign news unless a "major development" occurs.

Powerful people and institutions have self-interested reasons to resist the media's inspection and the accountability it can inspire.

The most basic problem faced by American journalists, both in war and peace, is that much of our society remains ignorant, and therefore unappreciative of the value of the profession's contribution to the quality and practice of our democracy. Powerful people and institutions have strong, self-interested reasons to resist the media's inspection and the public accountability it can inspire. The net effect of their efforts to deflect scrutiny is to weaken the democratic bond between the powerful and the powerless that can, alone, prevent the emergence of unchecked corruption. The phony "liberal media" accusation is just one of many tools in the conservative and corporate arsenal to reorder American society and the US economy to their liking. But as they've proven over and over, "working the refs" works. It results in a cowed media willing to give right-wing partisans a pass on many of their most egregious actions and ideologically inspired assertions. As such it needs to be resisted by liberals and centrists every bit as much as Bush's latest tax cut for the wealthy or his efforts to despoil the environment on behalf of the oil and gas industries.

The decades-long conservative ideological offensive constitutes a significant threat to journalism's ability to help us protect our families and insure our freedoms. Tough-minded reporting, as the legendary *Washington Post* editor Ben Bradlee explains, "is not for everybody." It is not "for those who feel that all's right with the world, not for those whose cows are sacred, and surely not for those who fear the violent contradictions of our time." But it is surely necessary for those of us who wish to answer to the historically honorable title of "democrat," "republican" or even that wonderfully old-fashioned title, "citizen." ■

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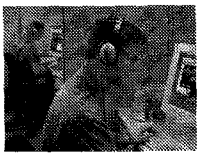

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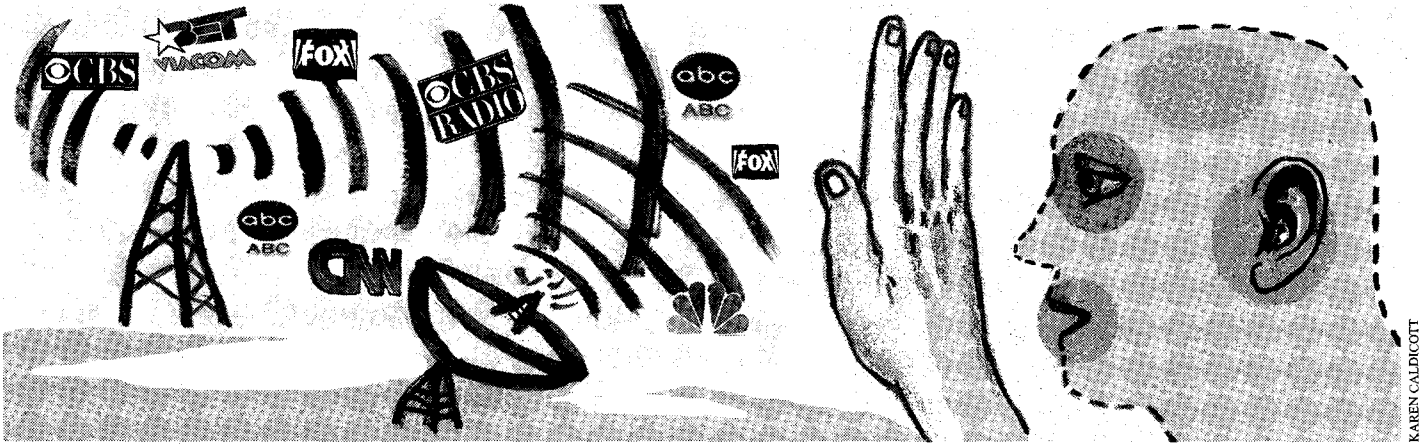
SUDDENLY, THERE ARE WIDESPREAD DISCUSSIONS ABOUT THE DANGERS OF MONOPOLY POWER.



KAREN CALDICOTT

Media Democracy's Moment

ROBERT W. McCHESNEY AND JOHN NICHOLS

In an era when the influence of corporations on government decision-making rivals the power of the trusts in the Gilded Age, something remarkable is taking place: a democratic revolution against media consolidation. At the prodding of media activists, working journalists and musicians who argue that corporate consolidation is undermining democracy and culture, members of Congress and the Federal Communications Commission are beginning to reassert the all-but-forgotten principle that decisions about media ownership should take into account the public interest, and they have started asking tough questions about one of the biggest and most significant corporate giveaways in US history. "Something is definitely shifting in the country and in Washington," says Independent Representative Bernie Sanders of Vermont, who has argued for years that media consolidation is undermining democracy by putting more and more broadcast and cable outlets, newspapers and Internet sites into the hands of companies guided only by commercial and bottom-line values. "Where just a few years ago most people did not think about media as an issue, and most members of Congress shied away from talking about how our media is failing to serve the public interest in even the most basic sense, now there is a real dialogue going on. And that dialogue is critical because it is forcing the FCC commissioners to listen to people other than industry lobbyists."

The immediate issue is a critical one: the FCC's forthcoming vote on whether to relax or eliminate longstanding rules preventing media consolidation at both the local and national levels. These rules prevent one broadcast network from owning another broadcast network, limit the number of local broadcast stations that any one broadcaster can own to systems serving 35 percent of the TV-viewing households in the United States, prohibit a company from owning cable TV systems and TV stations in the same community, and prohibit ownership of newspapers and TV stations in the same community, among other things. If they are lifted, or even relaxed, business analysts are unanimous in predicting, a wave of media mergers will dwarf the merger mania of the 1990s. If these mergers go forward, cities across the United States will find themselves with one or two firms dominating nearly all of their media. Think company town in the marketplace of ideas.

The nation's largest communications corporation giants are using all their lobbying muscle to ram the changes through the FCC, and to win Congressional consent to additional assaults on public-interest protections. A joint statement filed with the FCC by Fox, NBC (Telemundo) and Viacom (CBS) argues that "there is no longer any public-interest need served by the commission's ownership rules." Their line, according to Charles Lewis of the Center for Public Integrity, has been backed up for years by an intensive lobbying campaign that uses more lobbyists and spends more money than securities and investment firms or unions to influence federal decision-making. Lewis notes that between 1995 and 2000 the industry took FCC employees on 1,460 all-expenses-paid trips, and between 1997 and 2000 paid for 315 junkets for members of Congress and senior staffers. Toss in a steady stream of campaign contributions—more than $1 million by Viacom alone to Congressional candidates in 2002, and roughly $75 million from media giants and their organizations between 1993 and 2000—and it is no wonder that, as Lewis says, "a regulated industry has a stranglehold over the regulator and its Congressional overseers." Considering the lack of coverage by the major TV and cable news networks of the FCC and Congressional deliberations on ownership issues, it is difficult to challenge Lewis's assertion that "not only does the media aggressively lobby and contribute to the two political parties and politicians at the federal level, they also decide whose face and voice make it onto the airwaves. Such

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raw power provokes fear and trepidation in the political realm."

No wonder there was a general sense that the fix was in when the FCC last year announced its plan to review the rules. The review was required by the 1996 Telecommunications Act and by aggressively pro-industry judges on the federal appellate court. FCC chair Michael Powell had already declared, "I start with the proposition that the rules are no longer necessary." For years, Powell had positioned himself as an outspoken believer in a model of regulation that assumes that when firms make enormous profits it is a sign they are satisfying free-market demands. Powell and two other Republicans form the majority on the five-member FCC.

However, the public interest has made a comeback. The commission received roughly 2,000 comments—overwhelmingly negative—on the proposed rules changes by the January 2 close of the official comment period, and it was flooded with more in the following weeks. Grassroots activists, many of them veterans of the Independent Media Center movement and the frustrating struggle to open the airwaves to community-based microradio stations, as well as the Newspaper Guild and other media unions, public interest groups such as the Consumers Union, the Center for Digital Democracy and such unexpected allies as conservative columnist William Safire, built a loose-knit movement that made enough noise to be heard on Capitol Hill—where House Democrats Maurice Hinchey and Sherrod Brown and Bernie Sanders circulated a letter expressing concern about the rush to eliminate ownership rules. The ranking members of the Senate subcommittee that deals with antitrust and competition issues, Republican Mike DeWine and Democrat Herb Kohl, urged the FCC to "support the public interest in diverse media ownership." In the most powerful sign yet that activists are having a significant impact, Michael Powell was grilled January 14 by members of the Senate Commerce Committee on the proposed rules changes. "If the commission is heading toward eliminating some of the barriers to additional concentration, that is a huge mistake," said North Dakota Democrat Byron Dorgan, who noted that all of the commercial radio stations in Minot, one of the largest cities in his state, are already owned by a single company. Democrat Ron Wyden told Powell, "It seems to me...that what the commission is going to do is shift policy so that one company could own everything in town" in communities across America. Wyden then asked Powell if he was concerned about the fact that one corporation, Clear Channel, has since 1996—when radio ownership rules were loosened—gone from owning a handful of stations to more than 1,200 nationally. Powell, who once claimed "the market is my religion," surprised everyone by answering, "Candidly, I am troubled.... I am concerned about media concentration, particularly in radio."

Powell, whose political ambitions are no secret, recognizes that when even conservatives are arguing that deregulation is damaging democracy ("the truth is that media mergers have narrowed the range of information and entertainment available to people of all ideologies," wrote Safire in a recent *New York Times* column), it's time to pull out the moderate rhetoric. But that doesn't mean Powell has abandoned his commitment to relaxing rules. Two days after the Senate session, at a hearing at the Columbia University School of Law organized in response to commissioner Michael Copps's call for broader debate on the proposed rules changes,

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Powell tried to describe the current process as "a routine event." Copps shot back that there is nothing routine about what's being considered. Recounting how ill-thought-out rules changes in the Telecommunications Act had created a circumstance where "the majority of radio markets today are dominated by oligopoly," Copps said the FCC is in the midst of a "watershed" debate over "whether to visit upon the rest of the broadcast media that which we have already visited upon radio—and much, much more."

Copps and another Democratic appointee to the FCC, Jonathan Adelstein, have emerged as the commission's most consistent questioners of moves to ease ownership rules, and the loudest advocates of allowing time for more research and public input before the vote, now expected to take place by early summer. Universities have begun to respond to Copps's call for more forums—the next is on February 18 at the University of California's Annenberg School of Communications—and FCC staffers say they're now being deluged with requests from around the country.

Though Powell and the two other Republican-sponsored com-

Dishing up Christianity

In 1992 Congress passed a law designed to increase the diversity of television programming and to amplify traditionally underrepresented voices. The law required satellite TV services to reserve at least 4 percent of their programming capacity for noncommercial, educational channels. They would pay a relatively small fee to be included in the satellite services' basic programming packages. Today, many of the public-service channels the satellite services are carrying to meet that quota are run by well-financed Christian organizations, while alternative, non-Christian viewpoints remain scarce. On DirecTV, the nation's largest direct-broadcast satellite service, six of the twelve public-service channels are Christian. A seventh, run by the Mormon Church's Brigham Young University, airs religious programs several times a day. The Dish Network, the other main satellite TV provider, carries many of the same Christian channels, although fewer count toward its public-service requirement. The two satellite networks fill the rest of their quotas with the likes of C-SPAN, teacher-training channels and university stations.

Critics say diverse public-interest programming never became a reality in large part because Congress left the law's details up to the Federal Communications Commission. When the agency got around to implementing the law in 1998, regulators acknowledged the diversity goal but rejected calls to actually require any diversity among the public-service channels, instead giving the satellite services full discretion over which channels to carry. "We've reaped the unfortunate reward of the FCC [rules]," says Cheryl Leanza, deputy director of the Media Access Project, which had lobbied regulators to create an independent panel to select programming that would satisfy the public-service obligations. "The FCC has basically washed its hands of enforcing the set-aside."

The ubiquity of Christian programming—and the lack of independent perspectives—infuriates John Schwartz. He runs Free Speech TV, a channel that aims "to advance progressive social change" through antiwar programming and international documentaries. The Dish Network counts Free Speech TV toward its public-service quota and beams the channel into approximately 8 million homes. But DirecTV, with nearly 11 million subscribers, has repeatedly rejected Free Speech TV's applications to be carried. "This whole right-wing religious thing, I think, is a pretty sorry way to implement" the law, Schwartz says. Free Speech TV is the only unabashedly liberal channel available on satellite television. The next closest thing is WorldLink TV, which is carried on DirecTV and the Dish Network and features programs that often have a liberal tilt. Still, WorldLink's mission is to expose Americans to global viewpoints, not to embrace a progressive agenda.

There is no such shortage of unbridled advocacy among the Christian channels, several of which are on both DirecTV and Dish. Trinity Broadcasting Network, for example, has a daily programming lineup that includes shows hosted by John Hagee, who has derided "tree-hugging neo-pagans" and said homosexuality, like satanism, can be overcome by embracing the gospel; and Benny Hinn, who reportedly thinks God will destroy all homosexuals. Trinity also regularly airs the avidly pro-life *Christian World News* and Pat Robertson's right-wing *700 Club*. Colby May, an attorney who once worked for the archconservative American Center for Law and Justice and now represents the evangelical Trinity network, says Trinity and the other Christian channels reflect the diversity of faiths in the United States.

But is Trinity, which claims to be the world's largest Christian network, the kind of channel lawmakers had in mind when they created the public-service set-aside? Trinity is carried on thousands of TV stations, cable outlets and satellites worldwide and is run by the Trinity Christian Center, which itself owns twenty-three TV stations, as well as other Christian channels and a movie production company. With hundreds of millions of dollars in assets, Trinity could afford to pay the regular rate for satellite TV carriage. By contrast, Free Speech TV, which has a $1.7 million budget, can afford to be carried only if it can pay the lower fee reserved for public-interest channels.

The satellite services do not deserve all of the blame for the overall dearth of diversity. The high costs of starting a TV channel leave the satellite services with a limited number of public-service channels from which to choose. That number would probably be much greater if cable also had a set-aside requirement. But unlike satellite and broadcast media—which are disseminated via the public airwaves and therefore are subject to some public-service requirements—cable TV providers are not compelled by federal law to carry public-service programming. (In the case of broadcast TV, the FCC reserves hundreds of channels nationwide for noncommercial, educational use.) Kim Spencer, president of the nonprofit group that operates WorldLink, says the FCC should require cable operators to abide by a public-service set-aside similar to the satellite services' 4 percent quota. "If this same law applied to cable," he says, "instead of reaching a maximum of one-fifth of homes, there would be a potential of reaching all homes," thus making noncommercial channels more financially viable. But as long as an anti-regulation chairman is at the FCC's helm, that is probably wishful thinking.

DAVID ENRICH

David Enrich is a reporter in Washington, DC.

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missioners, Kevin Martin and Kathleen Abernathy, have agreed to attend at least some of the informal hearings, the FCC appears to be sticking with a plan to hold only one official public hearing, on February 27 in Richmond, Virginia. Once viewed as perfunctory, the hearing is now shaping up as a major focus of dissent. Activists with the Prometheus Radio Project and other reform groups plan to rent buses and converge on Richmond—a level of engagement that would have been unimaginable just a few years ago.

The rising citizen interest has inspired members of Congress to begin shaping legislation designed to prevent more consolidation and to start reversing at least some of what has already occurred. GOP Senator John McCain, the new chair of the Senate Commerce Committee, which oversees the FCC, grilled representatives of the Clear Channel conglomerate and the National Association of Broadcasters at a January 30 committee hearing and says that media consolidation is going to be one of his hot-button issues for 2003. McCain replaces Democrat Ernest Hollings, who along with Sanders has been one of the few Congressmen willing to take on the lobby. Representative John Conyers, the ranking Democrat on the House Judiciary Committee, is examining the prospect of challenging broadcast monopolies, while GOP Representative Mark Foley is talking about the need for Congress to assure that citizens have access to information about policy and politics. And McCain's campaign-finance-reform comrade, Democratic Senator Russ Feingold, has written legislation that would prevent the FCC from removing remaining limits on the number of radio stations a corporation can own in one community.

Feingold's Competition in Radio and Concert Industries Act

As Not Seen on TV

The debate over the dangers of media monopoly got a lot less theoretical in the last week of January, when Comcast, the nation's No. 1 owner of cable television companies, rejected the Peace Action Education Fund's request to purchase airtime for ads opposing an attack on Iraq. Though the thirty-second ads featured calm restatements of mainstream concerns by a diverse group of Americans, Comcast declined to allow them to air on CNN in Washington during the week of the President's State of the Union address because, it claimed, "we must decline to run any spot that fails to substantiate certain claims or charges." (At around the same time, CNN, Fox and NBC declined to sell airtime on their national networks for an ad from the Win Without War coalition, which includes the National Council of Churches and other groups; "we do not accept international advocacy ads on regions in conflict," said CNN spokeswoman Megan Mahoney.) Though Comcast gained control of 70 percent of the cable subscriber base in the nation's top twenty media markets as a result of a 2002 FCC decision, FCC chair Michael Powell said he saw no need to investigate its actions. But members of Congress, media union leaders and public-interest organizations joined antiwar groups in charging censorship, and warning against a further loosening of ownership rules. "This is a sign of what could go wrong in the future with media conglomeration if people are saying something even vaguely controversial," said Peace Action's Scott Lynch. —J.N.

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would also strengthen the FCC's merger review process by requiring the commission to scrutinize mergers of radio station ownership groups if those mergers might allow the new conglomerate to reach more than 60 percent of the nation's radio listeners. "The last time I checked, radio airwaves continued to be owned by the public," says Feingold, whose legislation has drawn broad support from musicians, media unions and consumer groups. "We need to remind the FCC that radio is a public medium. It must serve the public good." In a January speech that linked the struggle for media reform to broader efforts to renew American democracy the senator argued, "People should have choices, listeners should have a diversity of options, and Americans should be able to hear new and different voices. Radio allows us to connect to our communities, to our culture and our democracy. It is one of the vibrant mediums we have for the exchange of ideas, and for artistic expression. We must fight to preserve it."

Michael Bracy, director of government relations for the Future of Music Coalition, which recently produced a devastating study of the dearth of diversity in the radio industry, says it is time to start thinking about the fight for media democracy—starting with the upcoming FCC vote—as a winnable one. "I don't believe Michael Powell wants to make these sweeping rules changes on 3-to-2 votes, and it is not at all clear that there is a consensus for the changes anymore," Bracy says. "In fact, there might even be a consensus emerging in opposition to at least some of the changes." He adds, "I think Powell and the other commissioners are going to be under pressure from people in the Bush Administration who want these changes. But with the kind of activism we are seeing, and with so many members of Congress starting to speak up, it is no longer a foregone conclusion that we are going to see these rules rewritten. It is no longer a foregone conclusion that we are going to have to accept even more consolidation."

The battle over media ownership that will be waged over the next few months will be a different one than even the most optimistic critics of corporate media would have imagined just a few months ago. The outcome is very much up for grabs, and the revolution is still not being televised. But the window of opportunity for genuine media reform has been opened. ■

Letter From London

by D.D. Guttenplan

Not since the days when a young, bearded Bill Clinton demonstrated outside the US Embassy here has British opposition to an American war been so outspoken, so widespread and so politically impotent.

France may threaten a Gallic "*Non!*" at the United Nations, Chancellor Gerhard Schröder can give the German *Sonderweg* (special path) a whole new spin with his firm insistence that Germany will not join this war, but as far as Tony Blair is concerned if American troops march on Baghdad the British will be right alongside them—with or without the sanction of the UN. Blair's defenders argue that his "shoulder to shoulder" engagement with the Bush Administration has already moderated the terms of the American "war on terrorism" and, in the case of Iraq, has encouraged Washington to rein in the Pentagon's belligerent unilateralism in favor of the supposedly more nuanced approach favored by the State Department under Colin Powell. Blair's critics, who tend to prefer a different anatomical analogy for the Prime Minister's proximity to the President, point out that Powell makes an unlikely pacifist (an analysis borne out by recent events). They also increasingly question whether Blair's efforts have amounted to even a speed bump in the path of the American juggernaut.

Memo to Donald Rumsfeld: War against Iraq is every bit as unpopular in Britain as it is in the rest of "old Europe." When Blair made his case on David Frost's morning TV show on January 26, a telephone poll afterward showed that two-thirds of viewers were still not convinced, a result in line with recent polls by the London *Times* and *Guardian* newspapers. Take away the cover of a second UN resolution and support for military action drops to 10 percent. Rowan Williams, the incoming Archbishop of Canterbury, has denounced the war as immoral, as have the leaders of Britain's Catholics, Muslims and Methodists. Even the Chief Rabbi has expressed serious misgivings about the war unless "supported by a broad international coalition." The *Daily Mirror*, a tabloid that generally supports the Labour Party, has used its campaign against the war to build circulation. But other papers have been just as skeptical, and recently the *Daily Telegraph*, the only daily to actually come out in favor of the war, worried that "as things stand, the noes have it," because "the anti-war camp is getting the better of the argument."

With opposition ranging from trade unionists to high Tories, how long can Tony Blair hold out? The Labour Party enjoys a huge majority, while Parliamentary elections are years away. If, as many here fear, Britain follows America into war without the UN, and Blair is faced with a motion of no-confidence, the Conservative Party would almost certainly back the government. (Tory leader Iain Duncan Smith's slavish loyalty to Washington makes Blair look like Fidel Castro.) Nor is Charles Kennedy, the Liberal Democrat leader, whose outspoken opposition to the war has lifted his party into near-parity with the Tories, currently in a position to seriously damage Blair. The real threat would have to come from within Blair's own party, and though an unpopular war might split the Labour Party, and a long, bloody, inconclusive war would probably do so, at the moment the considerable Labour opposition to the war has come entirely from the party's backbenchers, not from within Blair's Cabinet.

D.D. Guttenplan, who writes from The Nation*'s London bureau, is the author of* The Holocaust on Trial *(Norton).*

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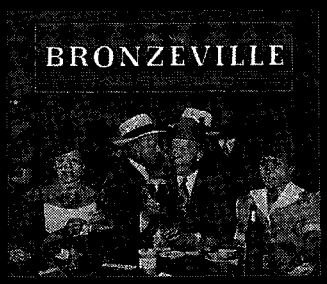

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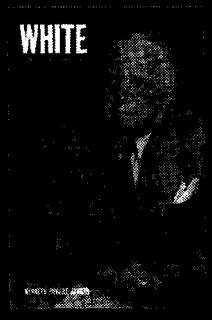

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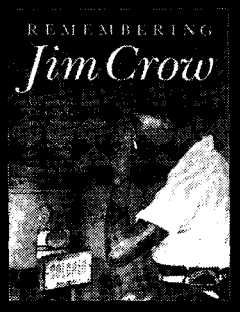

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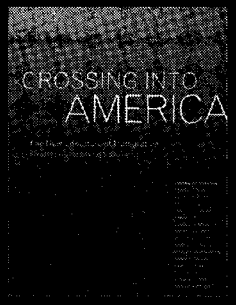

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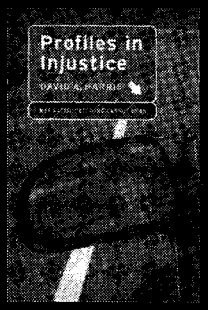

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Which isn't to say Blair hasn't paid a price for his bellicosity. An administration already seen as highhanded and authoritarian in its dealings with teachers, firefighters and local governments now seems even further from popular sentiment. And a government that once defined itself partly in opposition to the cranky Europhobia of the Tories now finds itself at odds with its closest European allies. Whatever happens in Iraq, the fallout from George and Tony's Big Adventure is likely to be toxic to Blair's long-professed aim of putting Britain at the heart of Europe.

In the meantime, how strong is European opposition? On the streets of Paris, Rome, Amsterdam or Berlin the war is at least as unpopular as it is in Britain—though only in France and Germany has that unpopularity been reflected in government policy. Germany's Schröder, who built his election comeback around opposition to this war, and governs as part of a coalition with the Green Party, is unlikely to waver. French President Jacques Chirac has much more room to maneuver. It is still unclear what prompted the French, whose recent declarations against the war seem to have caught both the British and the Americans by surprise, to rally to Germany's side. Given France's sizable Arab population, French interests in Iraqi oil, Chirac's own recent electoral history (as the beneficiary of a broad coalition opposed to Jean-Marie Le Pen) and France's debt to Germany for blocking British moves to curb European agricultural subsidies, it is hard to avoid the suspicion that Chirac, though acting globally, is thinking locally. And local conditions are subject to change. Between two-thirds and three-quarters of French people say they don't think war is justified. But only some 20,000 turned out for a demonstration in Paris on January 18—and most of them came from the Palestine solidarity movement.

What unites demonstrators across Europe, if not their governments, is a deep distrust, often approaching fear, of the United States.

What seems unlikely to change, and what unites demonstrators across Europe, if not their governments, is a deep distrust, often approaching fear, of the United States. The goodwill and sympathy so evident after the September 11 attacks has been replaced by anger at the Bush Administration's contemptuous disregard for international opinion on a host of issues, from global warming to Israeli aggression to the International Criminal Court.

In the past, European resentment of American dominance was largely confined to intellectuals, politically active leftists and those who had been personally or professionally displaced (the post-Suez anti-Americanism of the British colonial classes, for example). The cold war also froze political alignments across Europe. But the antiglobalization movement has mobilized a generation of Europeans too young to remember the cold war, and too alienated from conventional politics to care who won or why.

In November nearly half a million people filled the streets of Florence for the European Social Forum. Intended as a sequel to antiglobalization protests in Seattle and Genoa, which were marred by sporadic violence and by the inability of the disparate elements to agree on anything resembling a common program, Florence was notable both for its peaceful atmosphere and for the discovery that there was one issue that could unite anarchists and academics, Greens and trade unionists, Catholics and gay liberationists: opposition to war in Iraq. Even the Pope eventually came out against the war.

Here in Britain a January organizing meeting for the Stop the War Coalition brought together union activists, Trotskyist veterans, stalwarts from the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament (CND), antiglobalization campaigners, and a variety of Palestinian and Muslim groups. Holding such a disparate alliance together isn't easy, and the Coalition, whose organizing sinew comes largely from the Socialist Workers Party and from the more militant unions, isn't exactly a model of participatory democracy. At the meeting I attended the organizers kept tight control of the agenda, and though many items were put to a vote the results still hadn't shown up on the Coalition website nearly a month later. There was also the sense, familiar to those of us with memories of sectarian politics, that much had been decided beforehand, and that certain groups were immune from criticism. As I walked into the room a speaker from the Muslim Association of Britain was explaining why the Mombasa hotel bombing should not be seen as terrorism, and though a few people walked out, and even fewer expressed agreement, there was little appetite for confrontation on this or any of the other questions that divided the participants. Nor, despite all the references to Iraqi suffering, was there more than lip service paid to Saddam Hussein's role in his people's immiseration.

These are all serious flaws, and if the antiwar movement in Britain is going to do more than provide occasions for people to take to the streets these issues will have to be confronted. At the moment, it seems enough of an achievement to give people a chance to express their opposition to the war—an opposition denied an outlet by conventional politics. In late September a similar coalition (but without CND) managed to get over 250,000 people out in London. This was an incredibly diverse demonstration, and though it is likely that very few of them shared the organizers' sectarian priorities, the things they did share were sufficient: suspicion of American intentions, anger at a policy that excuses Israel but punishes Iraq, dismay at the rush to a war in which thousands of civilians will die, fear that we are sowing the seeds of many more 9/11s. On February 15 the antiwar movement will again seek to fill the streets—not just in London, but across Europe from Amsterdam to Warsaw. There will also be demonstrations across the United States.

If that happens there will be plenty of time to cultivate the grassroots, plenty of time for the French and Italian unions, which have so far been mostly spectators, to commit themselves, plenty of time for the people in Britain working to keep Wal-Mart from swallowing another chain of supermarkets here to make common cause with the campaigners organizing against the Blair government's decision to let the radar tracking station at Fylingdales in Yorkshire become an outpost of Bush's missile defense program.

Right now European opposition to the war is broad but shallow—probably too shallow to prevent war. But if the United States goes to war with imperial disdain for European opinion, the resulting cries of outrage and impotence may mark something else as well—the birth pangs of anti-imperialism as a genuine popular movement in Europe for the first time since 1968. ■

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LETTERS
CONTINUED

(Continued From Page 2)
joining his organizations. In my co-edited book, Márquez offers a more convincing explanation for the attitudes of the poor—namely, two decades of steady economic deterioration prior to Chávez's election. As a result, 57 percent of Venezuelans lack formal employment, and few of these people participate in the opposition's marches, which invariably take off from the affluent eastern sector of Caracas.

While Márquez is correct in pointing to the importance of the issue of corruption, she fails to recognize that as long as the media fuse news and propaganda on a regular basis, it is impossible to determine the extent of the corruption.

Márquez defends the work stoppage by explaining the grievances of the middle class, but the fact is that the key actors in this strike are the business organization Fedecámaras and the media. I have asked scores of Venezuelans how long the strike would have lasted without the support of Fedecámaras and the media, and no one has claimed more than one day.

I agree with Márquez that Chávez's economic program, passed in late 2001, was not open to national debate (an error the government paid for). But Fedecámaras is not attempting to oust Chávez because of lack of public debate (when has it expressed such concern in the past?) but because of the content of his program, which includes agrarian reform and state control of oil operations and the social security system.

Finally, Márquez expresses skepticism regarding Chávez's willingness to submit himself to a recall referendum in August, as the Constitution permits. If Chávez, after committing himself to such a referendum numerous times, were to back out, he would lose most of his support both at home and abroad. Thus I repeat the question raised in my article: Why not wait six months? STEVE ELLNER

UNPREPARED FOR BIOTERROR

Sherborn, Mass.; Bronx, NY

■ We applaud Katherine Eban's excellent article, "Waiting for Bioterror: Is Our Public Health System Ready?" [Dec. 9] We have three comments: First, Eban's article graphically describes the inadequacies of our current public health and medical care systems. We believe that the diversion of human and financial resources from essential health programs and services to terrorism preparedness is creating greater threats to our safety and security than the specter of terrorism. Five people died of anthrax in 2001; more than 400,000 died of tobacco-related disease, more than 100,000 of alcohol-related disease, approximately 30,000 from firearm injuries and many thousands from AIDS and other infectious diseases.

Second, critical to public health is primary prevention. Primary prevention of terrorism involves the control of weapons of potential terrorist use and addressing the underlying causes of terrorism. Weapons of mass destruction must be better controlled, by such means as strengthening the biological and chemical weapons conventions and controlling access to fissile and other radioactive materials. But so must access to small arms and ingredients for explosive and incendiary weapons, which account for the vast majority of terrorist acts.

Finally, assuring the conditions in which people can be healthy—the goal of public health—also depends on maintaining and protecting civil liberties and human rights. The violations of civil liberties and human rights since 9/11 threaten individual and community health. As editors of the recently published book *Terrorism and Public Health*, we believe that, given the challenges posed by terrorism and many other problems that threaten the public's health and safety, there needs to be a balanced approach to strengthening systems and protecting people.

BARRY S. LEVY, MD, MPH; VICTOR W. SIDEL, MD; ANGELA ADJEI
Montefiore Medical Center, Department of Epidemiology & Social Medicine

Baton Rouge, La.

■ Great article! My wife, a public health physician, and I have been working on public health problems for more than twenty years. Eban addresses the core problem—since Americans stopped being afraid of communicable diseases in the 1960s, there has been no political support for public health. Even HIV did not generate support, because it was treated as a personal health problem, not a public health problem, and the funding went into healthcare.

While some good will come of bioterrorism funding, little of it addresses the problems Eban identifies. The most important problem is lack of a proper career track for high-level public health professionals. If you do your job as a health director, you offend local government at some point, and you get fired. Many career public health physicians eventually leave because of the insecurity and financial and personal disruption of constant career changes. This problem will not be addressed by bioterrorism funds. EDWARD P. RICHARDS, *director*
Program in Law, Science, and Public Health, Louisiana State University

UP AGAINST THE WAL-MART

Washington, DC

■ Liza Featherstone's excellent article on Wal-Mart's attitude toward women ["Wal-Mart Values," Dec. 16] overlooked an important indicator of the retail chain's attitude: Wal-Mart's refusal to fill prescriptions for emergency contraceptives (ECs). For the past three years we have been holding press conferences around the country at Wal-Mart stores, calling on them to change their policy. They claim that it is an economic decision because demand is so low. They then concede that ECs are the only prescriptions that they do not fill. (Slavery and child labor are also economic decisions.) Women who work for Wal-Mart aren't the only victims of the company's sex discrimination; women who shop there are too.

PETER H. KOSTMAYER, *president*
Population Connection

Azle, Tex.

■ Wal-Mart may be a model of business success, but its ruthless business practices long ago turned me off. It goes where it is not wanted and temporarily undercuts prices to force more ethical companies out of business. It purchases from sweatshops and is fanatically anti-union and sexist. Some of its managers have been charged with forcing employees to continue working after they clock out and threatening to fire them if they refuse. When I heard that John Walton was supporting the private-school voucher movement in Texas, I decided that there was no way I, as a teacher, could support this corporation. K-mart and Target are my discount stores of choice.

JOANN THOMPSON

New Lebanon, NY

■ Several years ago, I took a family shopping at Wal-Mart. The Rotarian Club I belonged to was providing holiday shopping money for families too poor to purchase gifts for their children. While shopping, the mother of the family told me that she worked at that same Wal-Mart. How sad and ironic! PHILIP KELLERMAN

DEADLINE POET SOCIETY REDUX

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■ In response to the editors' "Ode to Bud": ["Letters," Jan. 13/20]:

"Who in the hell is Ogden Nash?"
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Even when said, as they were, in jest.
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He's a deadline poet with dead-on aim.
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Have you read his latest takeout menu?)
In pages deadly serious
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So here's a grateful thanks a million
For Ogvin Nash and Calden Trillion.

NANCY WINTNER

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BOOKS & THE ARTS

Genet's Palestinian Revolution

AHDAF SOUEIF

PRISONER OF LOVE.
By Jean Genet. Translated by Barbara Bray. New York Review Books. 430 pp. $16.95.

When *Prisoner of Love* was first published in France in 1986, *Le Matin* declared that "Genet was assuredly one of the greatest French prose poets of this century, reaching the same heights as Proust and Céline. *Un Captif amoureux* has all the sacred fire and poetry of his earlier works." Yet today several bibliographies do not list the book, and even readers familiar with Genet are sometimes unaware of its existence. I was amused to see that when the French theatrical Compagnie Lara adapted *Captif* into a play and performed it in April 2002 as part of the Prague Writers' Festival (dedicated to Genet), the performance was mentioned in the British press as "a new production of Genet's last play."

In fact, Genet's last play, *The Screens*, about the Algerian revolution, was written on the eve of Algeria's independence from France in 1961. Three years later, following the death of his companion of some nine years, the high-wire artist Abdallah Bentaga, Genet (having, it is said, destroyed his manuscripts) left France. His relationship with his homeland had never been simple. Born in 1910 and abandoned as an infant to the *assistance publique*, he had, by the age of 15, been jailed for petty theft. At 19 he was sent to Syria as a volunteer for the Foreign Legion, which he deserted seven years later, setting off on a "vagabondage" across Europe, toward France and jail once more. Genet's extraordinary 1940s saw him in and out of prison while producing the great narratives that won him the admiration and solidarity of Cocteau, Sartre and André Breton: *The Thief's Journal, Miracle of the Rose, Our Lady of the Flowers, Funeral Rites* and *Querelle of Brest*. In the 1950s he created the plays that are his great bequest to European postwar theater: *The Balcony, The Maids* and *The Blacks*, followed in 1961 by *The Screens*.

"Obviously," Genet said in an interview in the early 1980s, "I am drawn to peoples in revolt...because I myself have the need to call the whole of society into question." But if all of Genet's preceding work subverted the values and arrangements of society, *The Screens* was the first to engage with a specific revolt. Perhaps it was this that then drew other "transgressors" to appeal to him. And Genet responded. He wrote an *hommage* for the young revolutionary Daniel Cohn-Bendit in 1968, smuggled himself across the Canadian border to speak at Stony Brook, New York, on behalf of the Black Panthers in March 1970 and, in the autumn of that year, fetched up in the Palestinian bases in Jordan. He was to stay till the end of May '71 and then—intermittently—till the end of 1972. His involvement with the Palestinians is the story of *Prisoner of Love*.

Romantic and unflinching, Prisoner of Love *is a coming together of everything that was Genet: his art, his politics and his humanity.*

But Genet did not, as it were, go home and start writing. Another ten years were to pass before he started work on the new book. During this time, he was to say in an interview for Australian radio, "I no longer have the need to write...I have nothing further to say." Then, in September 1982, Genet (at the request of his Palestinian friend Leila Shahid) visited Beirut and found himself in the middle of the Israeli invasion of the city. He was, it seems, one of the first foreigners to enter the Palestinian refugee camp of Shatila after the Lebanese Christian Phalange, with the compliance of the Israeli command, tortured and murdered hundreds of its inhabitants. There, pushing open doors wedged shut by dead bodies, Genet memorized the features, the position, the clothing, the wounds of

Ahdaf Soueif's latest novel is The Map of Love *(Anchor). This essay will appear as an introduction in New York Review Books' new edition of* Prisoner of Love, *published this month.*

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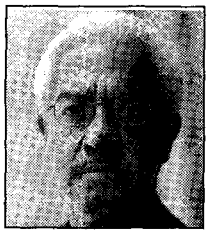

Lecture by **Manning Marable**, Professor of History and Political Science & Director of the Institute for Research in African-American Studies, Columbia University

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each corpse, till three soldiers from the Lebanese army drove him at gunpoint to their officer: "'Have you just been there?' [the officer] pointed to Shatila. 'Yes.'—'And did you see?'—'Yes.'—'Are you going to write about it?'—'Yes.'"

The essay "Four Hours in Shatila" was published in 1983, and in October of that year Genet began writing *Prisoner of Love*. It was as if, through the long years of virtual silence, everything was being saved up for this last book, which he finished just before his death of throat cancer in 1986. Serious and playful, romantic and unflinching, literary and factual, *Prisoner of Love* is a coming together of everything that was Genet: his art, his politics and his humanity.

But Genet is at pains to point out that "I'm not an archivist or a historian or anything like it." *Prisoner of Love* accumulates its power though a staggering display of leaps between times, places, styles and modes of consciousness. Taking in events from the beginning of the twentieth century to the time of writing, shifting from polemic to lyrical, from exposition to prophecy, fusing disparate bits of the world into living images, it refuses to be confined by definitions or summaries. "This," said Genet, "is *my* Palestinian revolution, told in my own chosen order."

His revolution is—at the beginning, amid the hills of Ajloun—"a party that lasted nine months. To get an idea of what it was like, anyone who tasted the freedom that reigned in Paris in May 1968 has only to add physical elegance and universal courtesy." And at the heart of the party were the young guerrillas, the *fedayeen*.

The party, however, was being held in grim circumstances. Expelled from their lands in 1948 and again in 1967, these Palestinians were refugees in King Hussein's Jordan. Radicalized by the Arab states' defeats in both wars, they had started to take matters into their own hands by forming guerrilla organizations. In 1970 there were at least five such organizations operating in Jordan, and the King had started to fear them. Their raids on Israel brought Israeli attacks on Jordanian villages, and there were several skirmishes between the *fedayeen* and Hussein's Bedouin troops. Although Arab governments tried to contain the conflict, it escalated till, on September 6, the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP), led by George Habash, hijacked three airplanes. They demanded the release of some 100 Palestinians from Jordanian jails and blew up one of the planes after releasing the passengers and crew. On September 16 the King launched a full-scale attack on the Palestinians. In the civil war that raged for ten days, some 3,000 Jordanian and 2,000 Palestinian fighters were killed. It was at the end of this "Black September" that Genet arrived at Ajloun: "War was all around us. Israel was on the watch, also in arms. The Jordanian army threatened. But every *fedayee* was just doing what he was fated to do." What they did was train, discuss revolution—and make music. One of Genet's recurring images is his memory of two young fighters "drumming on wood, inventing more and more cheerful rhythms" on a pair of deal coffins; coffins that were clearly destined to be either their comrades' or their own, for "nearly all of them were killed, or taken prisoner and tortured."

The root *fda* in Arabic signifies something relinquished in the certainty of gaining something more precious: a ransom, perhaps, or a sacrifice. "What made the *fedayeen* supermen," Genet wrote, "was that they put the predicament of all before their own individual wishes. They would set out for victory or death, even though each still remained a man alone with his own sensibilities and desires." In them he rediscovered one of the central themes that had occupied his earlier work. In *Miracle of the Rose* Genet had written: "Only children who want to be bandits in order to resemble the bandit they love...dare have the audacity to play that character to the very end." In the Palestinian *fedayeen* in 1970 he finds young men—boys almost—with the audacity to play the revolutionary to the very end. And with them, this "pink and white" 60-year-old French eminence, although he never thought of himself as Palestinian, felt "at home."

One of the unique qualities of this book is that Genet never exhibits any of the characteristics we have learned to expect from white men or women writing about Arabs. He has no inclination to "go native," but he never goes in for generalizations on "Arab customs" or the "Arab mind" in either his descriptions of the Palestinians or his reflections on them and on his feelings for them. More than that, his opening scene, where he finds himself sipping tea among the women in the camp at Baqa—women who laugh and joke when he asks if their husbands would mind his presence among them—is set up as a swipe at "Orientalist" references and as a joke at his own expense: "Something told me my situation was not what I'd have expected from my previous knowledge of the East: Here was I, a man, alone with a group of Arab women. And everything seemed to reinforce this topsy-

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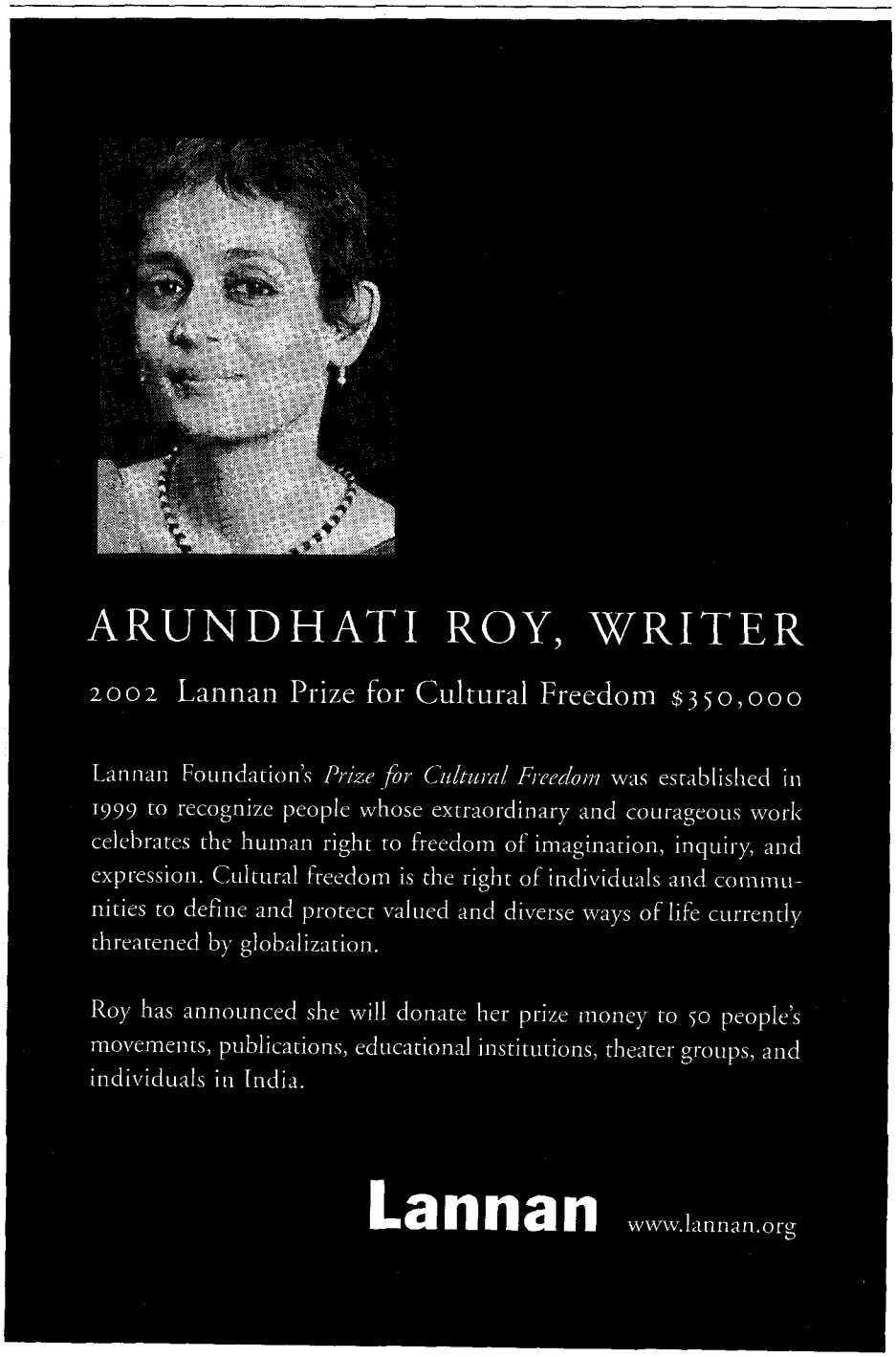
turvy vision of the Orient." From then on, in image after image, he fuses his own French Catholic world with this new one he is experiencing: The Bedouins dance with "twelve or fourteen soldiers holding arms like Breton bridegrooms"; an annex of the Fatah office makes him think of "the 1913 Russian Ballet: with five Parisian stage-hands standing by, several Nijinskys in striped costumes flecked with moss and dead leaves waiting to leap onstage in *Le Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune*"; a Circassian village on the Golan Heights, after six years of Israeli occupation, is like a village "in Normandy after the landing at Avranches. Looted by the Yanks." And then, in what becomes a motif of the revolution throughout the book, the image of the young *fedayee*, Hamza, and his mother "linked to that of the Pieta and Christ."

But if Genet was *bouleversé* by the *fedayeen*—as his friend Leila Shahid put it—he retained a clear eye for the circumstances surrounding them: "[The *fedayee*'s] brightness protected him, but worried the Arab régimes.... What was it the Arab world so urgently needed, that the Palestinian resistance should come into being?" In fixing not just his eye but his heart and his genius on the Palestinian revolution, Genet also sees the world surrounding it: the Palestinian leaders who "serve two masters"; the Arab rulers "faithful to America"; America ("Does she support Israel...or just make use of her?"); and Israel ("If you're against Israel you're not an enemy or an opponent—you're a terrorist. Terrorism is supposed to deal death indiscriminately, and must be destroyed wherever it appears. Very smart of Israel to carry the war right into the heart of vocabulary..."). And the revolution itself? "There's a shop in Châtellerault where I once saw a knife as small as a penknife with blades that opened slowly one after the other and then gently shut again, after having threatened the town in all directions...open, this small provincial masterpiece swelled up until its forty-seven blades resembled a porcupine at bay or the Palestinian revolution. That too was a miniature threatening in all directions: Israel, America, the Arab kingdoms. Like the penknife in the window it turned on its own axis and no one wanted to buy it."

Time and time again as I read *Prisoner* I found myself wishing that Genet were alive today. As Edward Said wrote in 1990, he "fully intuited the scope and drama" of what the Palestinians were living through, recording "a seismographic reading, drawing and exposing the fault lines that a largely normal surface had hidden." And in doing this he was also reading the future. It could be said that for Genet the enemy was always the rigid form: a movement that became a government, a revolution that turned into an authority. The Palestinians were the antithesis of rigidity; he was captivated by the flexibility of their identity. It could embrace, it seemed, anyone who wanted to be part of it: German and Cuban doctors, a French priest, a nun, two young Frenchmen called Guy, a young Israeli who had renounced Zionism. Everyone was welcome at the party. And—as is testified to by Genet's failure to realize that the *fedayee* leader he knew as "Abu Omar" was in fact a Christian—"Palestinian" always came before "Christian" or "Muslim."

Yet this openness itself, Genet saw, could in the prolonged absence of victory prove a weakness. In a passage just after the middle of the book he examines the French expression *entre chien et loup*—dusk (literally, "between dog and wolf"), a time when one creature might metamorphose into another. For a moment Genet pulls back from his image: "In order to record the next phase of the story," he suggests that "perhaps I ought to draw back at first and take a run at it." What he's taking a run at is his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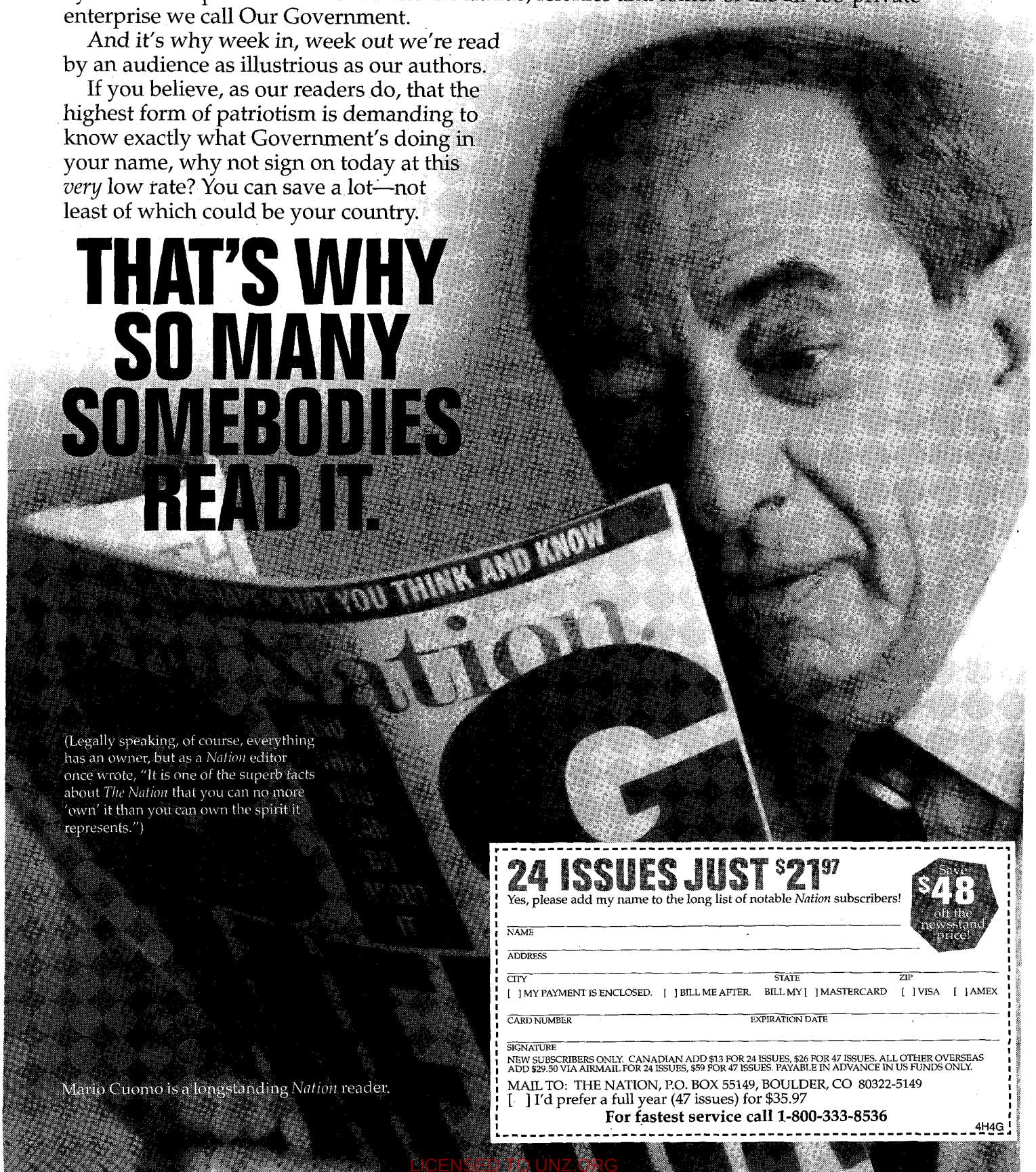

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fear of the *fedayeen* metamorphosing into Islamic militants; the "logical conclusion" of his feeling that "the expression *entre chien et loup*, instead of connoting twilight, describes any, perhaps all, of the moments of a *fedayee*'s life." The proposition brings "howls of protest...from the PLO officials." But Genet's premonition is so strong that—uncharacteristically—he records the exact date of its occurrence: "But as one of their leaders told me today, 8 September 1984, that such a thing was impossible, let's pretend this digression was never either written or read."

This remarkable passage is very much Genet at work. Like a miraculous street artist, he beckons us over to watch as he paints prophetic lines and shadows on the pavement. The image complete, he walks away with a shrug.

But what he has to say is of tremendous importance, and he knows it. There is no doubting that once again he has nailed his colors to the mast of the oppressed, to the "metaphysical revolution of the native," in this instance the Palestinian, as before it had been the Black Panthers and before that the Algerian revolution. Said reports that in Beirut in the fall of 1972, speaking of Sartre's strong pro-Israeli stance, Genet had said "he's a bit of a coward for fear that his friends in Paris might accuse him of anti-Semitism if he ever said anything in support of Palestinian rights." Genet would probably not have been surprised to see otherwise admiring critics, like Edmund White, fearful that such an accusation might be leveled against him, seeking to separate the genius of the book, somehow, from its politics. Similarly, Clifford Geertz has written that "Genet is, for all his sympathy for the Palestinians' predicament not so much a partisan...as a connoisseur of pure rebellion." Genet himself would have rejected such expedient distinctions. "It's not the justice of their [the Palestinians'] cause that moves me," he writes, "it's the rightness."

And yet, if the Palestinians found in Genet a passionate friend and a thoughtful interpreter, Genet, writing in the early 1980s, found in them the subject that would draw from him a powerful and layered articulation of the themes that had informed his work of the 1940s and '50s: the heroism of the outlaw, the beauty of the constant, willful overturning of the established order, the transfiguration of eroticism into chastity, the power of a nonreligious spiritual life, the weightlessness of death, the continuation of a feeling beyond the life of the individual who felt it and the tensile and creative relationship between the image and its reality.

This is a book about the Palestinian revolution (with some pages about the Black Panther movement), but it is also about art and about representation. In *The Balcony*, *The Maids* and *The Blacks*, the central theme is the relationship of appearance to reality. For Genet the image is central both to art and to life. It can make reality more bearable and keep memory alive: "Every district in a camp tried to reproduce a village left behind in Palestine...Nazareth was in one district, and a few narrow streets away Nablus and Haifa. Then the brass tap, and to the right Hebron, to the left a quarter of old El Kods (Jerusalem). Especially around the tap, waiting for their buckets to fill, the women exchanged greetings in their own dialects and accents, like so many banners proclaiming where each patois came from." But its mask can also be used to manipulate reality to sinister ends. Genet cites the murder of three Palestinian leaders in Beirut by three pairs of Israeli commandos camping it up as ringleted queens who "kissed one another on the lips to shock the bodyguards into thinking they were just shameless, giggling Arab pansies.... Newspapers all over the world described the assassination, but none of them called it terrorism on another country's sovereign territory. No, it was considered as one of the Fine Arts, deserving the relevant Order and receiving it."

The Palestinians, Genet saw, were no good at making images, and the journalists, he wrote, described them 'as they were not.'

Finally, and most important, there is the image that needs to be created in order to convey reality, to make it, so to speak, real. "It's not enough just to write down a few anecdotes. What one has to do is create and develop an image or a profusion of images." And this is the task that Genet has set himself in *Prisoner of Love*. For an image, he suggests, "is the only message from the past that's managed to get itself projected into the present." It is a measure of Genet's pinpoint accuracy, the hard-headed realism that accompanies his poetics of the image, that today—two decades on—the Palestinians are more than ever embroiled in an "image" battle. (Genet's friend, the onetime Black Panther leader David Hilliard, has embarked on a fight to rescue the image of his group from a new and different group calling itself by the same name. "This is about more than the ownership of a trademark," Hilliard is quoted as saying. "It's about who controls and defines history.")

In his 1982 interview for Australian radio, Genet insisted that the work he had done of his own accord, the novels written in prison, had been done in the certainty—because of the certainty—that it would never be read. His plays he dismissed as having been written on commission, except for *The Screens*, which he had thought would never be performed because of its cast of 107 characters. In *Prisoner* the possible absence of a reader is at once reassuring and troubling: "This book will never be translated into Arabic, nor will it ever be read by the French or any other Europeans. But since I'm writing it anyway...who is it for?"

Sartre had written—in praise of Genet's work—that "he reduces the episode to being merely the manifest illustration of a higher truth.... He reconstructs the real on every page...in such a way as to produce for himself proof of the existence of God. That is, of his own existence." It is not surprising that in 1982 Genet brushes this aside with "[Sartre's] book called *Saint Genet* was really about himself." For in the work that he was about to embark upon, unconstrained and uncommissioned, Genet was engaged in a project at once more artful and more truthful. The Palestinians, he saw, were no good at making images: "The...journalists, describing the Palestinians as they were not, made use of slogans instead. I lived with the Palestinians, and my amused astonishment arose from the clash between the two visions. They were so opposite to what they were said to be that their radiance, their very existence, derived from that negation. Every negative detail in the newspaper, from the slightest to the boldest, had a positive counterpart in reality." It is this reality that Genet devoted his final years to recording. He feared the revolution's defeat and "the evidence, rarely accurate but always stirring, vouchsafed to the future by the victors." Age and illness were against him. Pain was there too. In the last months he refused painkilling drugs to retain the lucidity that he needed to create, for the future, his image of the reality of the Palestinian revolution: "Would Homer have written or recited the *Iliad* without Achilles' wrath? But what would we know about Achilles' wrath without Homer?" Genet, the great subversive image-maker, knew that he had found his subject and his subject had found him. ■

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The New Product Placement

REBECCA SEGALL

BRANDED: The Buying and Selling of Teenagers. By Alissa Quart. Perseus. 239 pp. $25.

Last fall, a half-dozen child psychologists lurked around New York's Yale Club at a convention called "Advertising & Promoting to Kids" in search of new, higher-paying clients. They were hoping to sell their smarts to marketers and advertisers attending lectures on "Emotional Branding" and on the troubled post–September 11 economy. As marketer David Bryla put it, today's advertisers must employ a "full frontal attack" on children. Over the past decade more and more psychologists have been helping corporations win their war, successfully preying on kids' developmental stages, anxieties and vulnerabilities.

In the crowd sat Susan Linn, an idealistic, old-fashioned therapist, gasping and sighing in disgust as the guest speaker declared, "Remember folks, all kids want to do is fit in!" and "Brand them when they're babies!" In disbelief, Linn exclaimed loud enough for her fellow attendees to hear, "These are the only people I know who talk about kids incessantly without asking: 'But is it good for them?'" Linn has been mortified over the fact that psychologists are using their training, as she sees it, to exploit rather than to help kids.

Linn was at the conference not as a participant but as a spy. As an organizer of another conference, held at the same time one floor below, called "Consumer Kids: Marketers' Impact on Children's Health," she wanted to hear the rhetoric firsthand. The Harvard-affiliated group she works for, Stop Commercial Exploitation of Children (SCEC), had intentionally planned the conference, along with a demonstration outside the club, to fall at the same time and place as the advertising one.

Linn has a few major concerns. She believes it is unfair to market to kids under 8 because they don't understand that commercials are supposed to make them want what they see. And worse, she says, the commercials are bad for their health. "Most food ads targeted to kids are high in fat, sugar and calories," says Linn. Preschoolers' risk of obesity increases by 6 percent for every hour of television watched per average day, she adds. She contends that sloppy political changes have only deepened the problem. Budget cuts to the Education Department, along with a call to corporate America to do something about education, paved the way for programs like Channel One (mandatory sponsored newscasts and marketing in schools, which Consumers Union calls "Captive Kids"), which broadcasts to 12,000 middle, junior and high schools a day. She is concerned about how kids' health has been affected since desperate officials, in need of funds for textbooks and teachers, gave Coca-Cola and McDonald's entree into their schools. She laments the day children's television was deregulated—when psychologically savvy marketers were given free rein to use kids' entertainment as a marketing tool for toys, exploiting kids' vulnerabilities in the comfort of their own home. "The negative impact of marketing to children depends on each child's weaknesses or predilections," she says. Researchers who presented at Linn's anti-conference linked marketing to youth to childhood obesity, poor body image, eating disorders and violent behavior.

As advertising to kids becomes a bigger and bigger industry—children spent more than $28 billion of their own money in 1999 and directly influenced the spending of more than $600 billion of their parents' money by 2000—advertisers turn to psychologists to learn how to "brand" children more efficiently. There is at least one psychologist on almost every advertising team that promotes to children. And spending on marketing and advertising to kids hit $12 billion in 1999, leaving kids bombarded with more than 40,000 manipulative ads a year on TV alone.

Linn's associates, Allen Kanner and Tim Kasser, co-editors of *Psychology and Consumer Culture* (to be published by the American Psychological Association in October), are trying to convince the leaders of the APA to declare that helping child marketers appeal to children is unethical. The APA has set up a task force to review their proposal, signed by sixty psychologists, which also asks that the organization issue a public statement denouncing the use of psychological techniques to assist corporate advertising to children and that it launch a campaign to review and research the negative effects of advertising on kids and teens.

Kasser explains that young children don't have the cognitive capacity to understand persuasive intent, and that the actor on the screen is paid to seem happy. "Teens have a more finely tuned sense of these things," he says, "but they are entering another vulnerable period. They are starting to leave the family group and enter the world of peers. They are becoming self-conscious and very aware of being looked on by others. And marketers prey on that."

These activists make a strong case suggesting that children and teens don't have such a developed sense of the world, which leaves them—in the minds of marketers—defined by and valued for their plasticity. In *Branded: The Buying and Selling of Teenagers*, Alissa Quart systematically shows us how far toy, fast-food and clothes companies, plastic surgeons and their marketers, together with their partners in television, film, public education and politics, and even parents, have gone to make sure that kids are well branded despite the potential consequences for self-esteem and physical health. Quart, who focuses mostly on middle-class white kids, eerily demonstrates how the relentless marketing to kids has insidiously permeated what used to be, not even fifteen years ago, youth's sacred spaces: the teen movie and magazine, youth literature, school social events, video games, extreme sports, the dressing room and worst of all, their inner lives.

Take, for example, the 2001 documentary *Dogtown and Z-Boys*, on the history of skateboarding. According to Quart the film was funded by Vans sneakers, and it's Vans shoes that are seen flashing and dashing throughout every scene, leaving behind their emotional stamp of cool. She quotes Jay Wilson, vice president for marketing at Vans: "We really try to connect emotionally with the kids and find new ways of doing things. We're getting more public relations on this thing than we ever imagined."

Quart also compares teen movies of the 1980s with those of today. *The Breakfast Club* and *Heathers* depicted freaks and losers as heroes and ultimately united youth against self-interested adults and mainstream authority, observes Quart, in contrast to movies such as *Clueless*, *Bring It On* and *Legally Blonde*, which celebrate popularity and status quo. Quart's explanation of

Rebecca Segall, former senior editor at Psychology Today, *now freelances for publications including the* Village Voice, New York, Salon.com, Utne Reader, Psychology Today *and* Spin.

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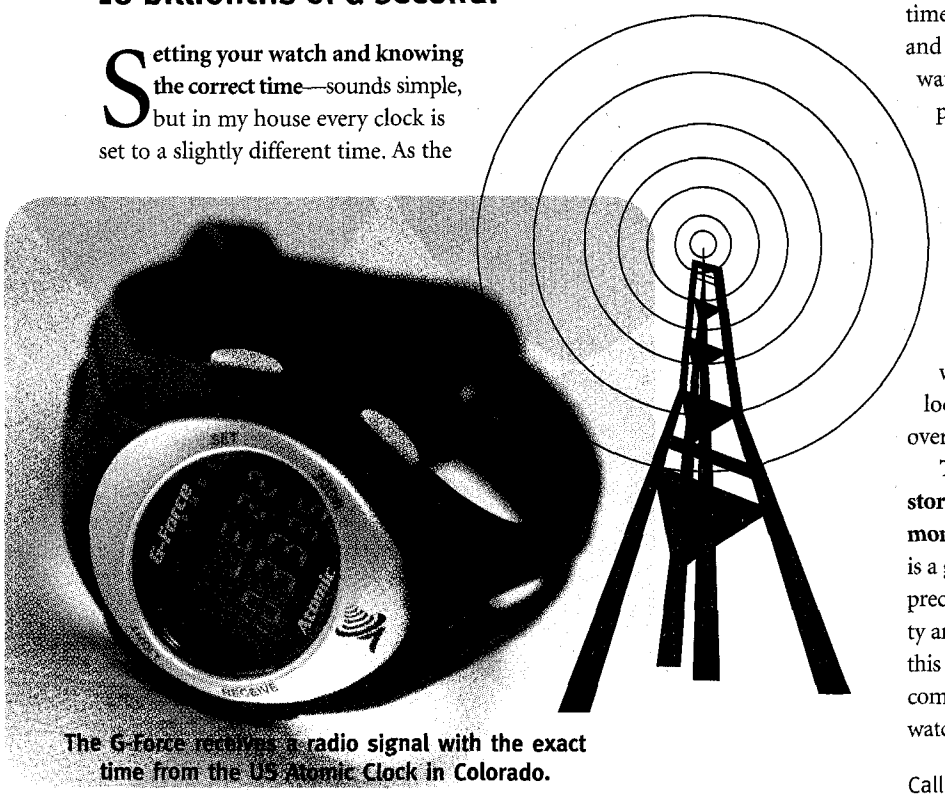

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the change subtly lies with the new marketing technique of placing products throughout films: Losers don't sell Clairol, Clinique, Tiffany bracelets and Prada. And clearly, the goal of the day is to sell.

"Teens suffer more than any other sector of society for this wall-to-wall selling," Quart argues in the introduction of her book: They are at least as anxious as their parents about having enough money and maintaining their social class, a fear that they have been taught is best allayed by more branded gear. And they have taken to branding themselves, believing that the only way to participate in the world is to turn oneself into a corporate product or corporate spy to help promote products to other kids.

Marketers and advertisers seek to appeal to adult psychology as well, but clearly the playing field is not as skewed. Emotional branding guru Marc Gobé just published *Citizen Brand: 10 Commandments for Transforming Brands in a Consumer Democracy*, a book that seeks to help companies develop socially responsible brand strategies in order to "earn buyers' loyalty." Gobé is the executive creative director of Desgrippes Gobé Group, which is responsible for emotion-driven brand design for Coca-Cola, IBM, Reebok, Starbucks, Gillette and Victoria's Secret. In adult-targeted campaigns, rather than focusing on anxieties such as kids' desire to fit in, Gobé suggests, marketers indulge buyers' healthy desires, such as women's tendency to bond with one another, the bohemian middle class's urge for adventure and thrill-seeking, gay and lesbians' desire to be accepted and openly depicted in the copy and images of ads, and Generation X's celebration of racial diversity. When it comes to sports, Gobé points out, women are more interested in the "experiential and personal perspective and less interested in the external achievement." A Nike ad that targets "everyday women" shows a female runner sprinting through the city and says "I am not Marion Jones." Nike's website explains, "It's not about perfection and not about winning or losing. It's about human potential. It's the feeling you get when you finish your first marathon, 10K race or walk around the block... It's small, personal victories as well as large public ones." Rather than take advantage of us, these ads appeal to adult sensibilities.

Most parents don't have the time and energy it requires to fight the ubiquitous and overwhelming influence the media have on their children's inner lives. Many are even grateful to television for keeping kids occupied. But some older kids maintain a critical perspective and can detect when they are being manipulated, and are trying to fight back in their own way. Quart's book takes surprisingly uplifting turns as the author includes many examples of teens leading the fight to remain "unbranded" in this era of unregulated marketing to kids. She brings her readers to the precocious youth magazine *New Moon*, where young teen reviewers and activists—privy to and intolerant of a society that desperately relies on exploiting kids and teens in order to drive an unstable economy—vent. She quotes 16-year-old Lynn Grochowski critically analyzing *She's All That*: "When Laney makes the move to 'normal' it is only because of her new wardrobe, haircut, addition of makeup, and loss of glasses." A 15-year-old adds, "This movie would be much less shallow if Zach were to be interested in Laney for who she really is, not because she turns out to be beautiful after a makeover." And as an 11-year-old put it in a review of *The Princess Diaries*, "I wonder how many young girls, after seeing this movie, wanted to throw out their glasses, straighten their hair, pluck their eyebrows, or cover their freckles."

But movie plots and product placement are only one form of attack that kids' self-esteem is up against. According to Quart, a 1970s antitrust court decision that deregulated medical advertising and ads for learned professional service laid the foundation for ads in *Teen Vogue* and *Seventeen* for an herbal breast-enhancement tablet. Perhaps it is no coincidence, Quart points out, that a *Seventeen* poll of readers recently found that 25 percent had considered liposuction, a tummy tuck or breast augmentation. The magazine in effect exploited its loyal (and impressionable) readers' anxieties rather than helping to diminish them through articles and analyses. The freedom of the Internet hasn't helped protect youth either: Doctors who, as Quart puts it, may have once "tried to maintain a special dignity in their marketing" now offer online inspirational profiles of young teens who have rid themselves of their "hook noses" or "weak chins."

But, according to Quart, when public education sells out to the marketing-obsessed culture, the whole system seems finally to turn on its head. She closes her book with a refreshing—and quite rare—respectful depiction of teenagers as enlightened young people who will do what it takes to place much-needed boundaries on the misguided adults in their midst. In the chapter "Schools for Sale," Quart draws an inspiring picture of teens from a severely underfunded public school in Philadelphia demonstrating consistently against the privatization of their school by Edison Schools Inc., a publicly traded, New York–

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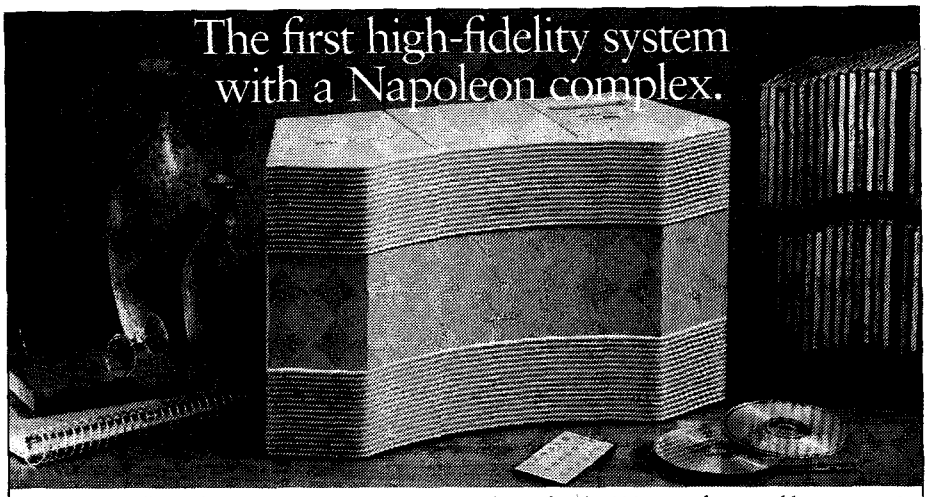
based company that operates more than 133 public schools in twenty-two states and Washington, DC. Chris Whittle, founder of Channel One—the advertising-laden station that blasts into classrooms—is Edison's CEO.

"Edison is like Channel One," says 17-year-old Max Goodman. "It will have an unconscious effect on all the students just like advertising in the schools. And The Gap has money [invested in] Edison, so maybe one day they'll say, 'This lesson is brought to you by the Gap.'" Another student chimes in, "My education shouldn't be for profit. Do I want to learn that one plus one equals Pepsi?" Edison eventually became the subject of a Securities and Exchange Commission investigation centering on improper accounting and classification of revenue. The investigation resulted in the company restating its revenues. Quart surmises that the ongoing student protests, compounded with the scandal, finally put Edison on the defensive and ultimately led the board of education to cease relinquishing additional schools to Edison's control.

Quart, a product of academic parents and lefty summer camps, is more than a journalist. She has profound activist assumptions and intentions that surfaced even in the initial stages of writing, as she aggressively insured the preservation of her chapter called "Unbranding," which—unlike most literature that focuses on the vulnerability and victimization of youth—highlights kids' fighting their exploitation in a variety of small and large ways. Quart seamlessly weaves within her cultural criticism and warnings an extremely insightful analysis of the transformation of youth social movements:

> When I was a teenager in the late 1980s, teen activists directed their energies to the battle to end apartheid and in honor of abstractions like world peace.... Now, the youth movement is very much directed at issues of youth and against the forces that oppress them in their schools and at home. Kids may well consider youth itself something of an embattled minority—and that in turn informs their politics, the area of focus being the retention of civil rights in their classrooms.... The Philly activists are more evidence that some among Generation Y have not taken the merchandizing of their minds, bodies, and subjectivities lightly. They are willing to fight back.

In her profound and pivotal work *No Logo*, Naomi Klein included an important story of adult activists working hard to en-



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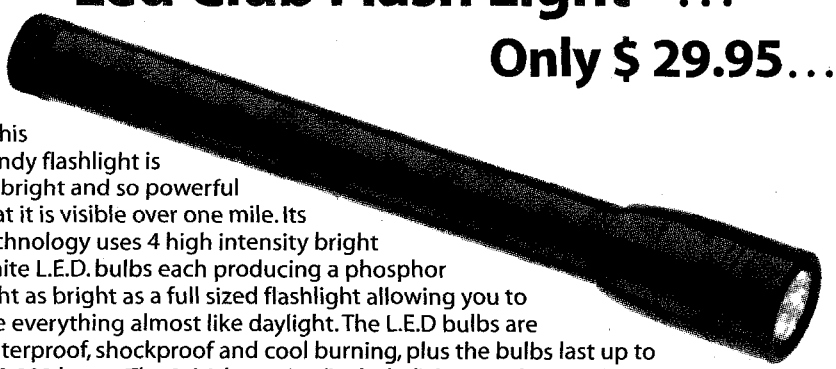

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lighten resistant teens, arduously setting the theoretical and logistical groundwork for such a youth movement. Quart in *Branded* fused philosophy and structure with the passion and fury of fully aware and fed-up real-life adolescents. German philosopher Hannah Arendt believed that only a tiny percentage of humanity is capable of transcending the "human condition" to think critically about social norms. If she were alive today, I wonder if she would suggest that American culture's apathy toward corporate manipulation of children is an example of the "banality of evil." If so, activists such as Linn, Kanner, Kasser and Quart are making extraordinary strides in fighting it, considering what they are up against. Quart's work hasn't been embraced by seemingly pro-branding reviewers but was called "brilliant" in, of all places, the Sunday Business section of the *New York Times*. And Linn, for her part, is making some child marketers stop and think, at least for a moment. As the marketers' conference ended and a speaker rapped joyously about "kids as essential consumers," one twentysomething, dolled-up attendee turned to me and whispered: "You know, now that I'm thinking about it, the way they're talking about children *is* pretty creepy." ■

DANCE

Street-Dancing Man

GINGER DANTO

BILL SHANNON "CRUTCHMASTER" AND THE STEP FENZ IN *AOW: REMIX*

In classical dance, the art of imbalance—the pirouette, the jeté or the mere ethereal, alighted walk that alone makes audiences feel they are getting their money's worth—is the purview of the able. In the breakbeat idiom of hip-hop—which enlists not only the legs and feet as supports but the hands and elbows, sometimes the head, as available extensions on which the body pivots, pinwheel-like, everything else poised in midair—imbalance is the centrifugal force that holds often lightning-fast movements together. As long as one or another body part functions and holds its due weight, the expansive, exuberant genre known as hip-hop is possible.

It took a dancer with a disability—a congenital weakness in the hip joints that requires the use of crutches for continuous movement—to draw this further line between two worlds of dance whose differences are by now copiously documented. That is—being able to walk perfectly is not a prerequisite for accomplished hip-hop.

Bill Shannon, who goes by the revelatory stage moniker "Crutchmaster," is a 32-year-old, interdisciplinary performing artist who discovered dance as a boy after he was diagnosed with an esoteric condition that pretty much precluded it, called Legg-Calvé Perthes. Owing perhaps to that innocence that enables children to perceive even lousy circumstance as novelty before tragedy, Shannon turned his 7-year-old's crutches to acrobatic advantage by doing flips, or strides the length of which the longest-legged person is incapable of in normal life. It is not every child who walks with his own personal jungle gym, and in his craving for motion Shannon instinctually developed a vocabulary of necessity. He calls it the "Shannon technique," and it became the foundation for a choreography that both utilizes and eclipses its inspiration in limits, joint stiffness and the jagged-limb look that disability confers.

Along the way he incorporated into his scenography the skateboard, which to an able youth is a fun, often artfully daring means of locomotion, and which to Shannon was a further liberation from the inescapable fact of his physical constraints.

Meanwhile, the advent of hip-hop, which came of age at about the same time as Shannon, and in the same place—the fringe of cities such as his native Pittsburgh, or Chicago, where he attended the School of the Art Institute—brought legitimacy to the edgy, spontaneous but often remarkably disciplined dance form developed on the most public stage of all—the street. Shannon had been performing there since his early teens.

The trajectory of hip-hop from the proverbial street, the ghetto, the projects, at best some unaccoutered shelter such as a subway station, to the rarefied milieu of the theater, is relatively recent. And Shannon has been among its more eloquent agents: first with his 1999 ensemble work, *The Art of Weightlessness*, and now with its stepchild, *AOW: Remix*, which premiered last December in Chicago and concludes its New York run at Dance Theater Workshop in the context of its Carnival Series on February 9. (Shannon plans to return to New York in late March, with new work for various outdoor venues.)

Remix, a studio term for reworking existing music to altered effect, producing the kind of repetitive, tech-beat din amped at exponential decibels in clubs, refers to the genesis of the piece in an earlier work. It also refers to that demimonde of the club, somewhere between street and stage, where new dance styles are born into the anonymity of dim lights and detonating music, and where, as a frequent denizen, Shannon honed his art form.

Throughout the seventy-minute *Remix*, the presence of DJ Excess working the turntables in a corner of the stage re-creates that unspoken but critical rapport unique to clubs, between dancers and the seamless sound on which they depend. For decor, VJ Vello Virkhaus's background of projected video designs imparts narrative themes of, say, danger or harmony, between cryptic motifs that mimic the true club dancer's eventual oblivion, by the end of the night, to the objects of external senses. David Szlasa's alternately stark, dark or colored lighting reiterates the prescribed mood.

In this spare but wholly adequate context, *Remix*'s episodic dance play, infused with the coded gestural of contemporary street culture, relates aspects of human relationship: camaraderie, love, conflict, estrangement, outrage, indifference and, especially poignant in Shannon's solos, one's own hapless relation to oneself.

Functioning like a chorus in a traditional *oeuvre*, the five spectacularly agile members of the New York ensemble crew, the Step Fenz (Oronde Crowe, David Fogler, Bonnie Rodriguez, Erika Sato, Emmanuel Vega) initiate the action, variously incarnating stereotypic characters via dance styles. A death figure treads stealthily. A pregnant woman ambles. Two men spar in an escalating argument, their taut bodies cartoon poses of defiance.

Shannon soon appears, "incognito" in a dark hooded jacket all but shrouding his face. His crutches are of course a giveaway, though as custom-made, round-soled silver bars that he glides effortlessly alongside

Ginger Danto is a writer living in New York who previously covered the arts from Paris.

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himself, they betray most conventional association with prosthetics. But it is when he begins to move, and at some point shed his outerwear to reveal the standard baggy-pants-and-T-shirt uniform of urban youth—that he brings a note of grace unequaled by colleagues in full possession of their limbs.

In the glorious gait of the gallop, a horse's four legs become intermittently suspended, in a *trompe l'oeil* that took both art and science a while to fathom. With each step, Shannon employs his crutches as auxiliary appendages with which to achieve a similarly uncommon state of balance. They are vertical while he swings horizontal; splayed while he emerges upright. Compliant props in a partnered dance, à la Fred Astaire with a coat rack, they take on a magic life of their own. Meanwhile Shannon's expression, less smug than Chaplinesque, conveys with mimelike wonder the miracle by which he can move at all.

For both artist and audience, the ultimate moment comes when one forgets they are crutches, or that they are necessary, and it happens often.

In an almost burlesque sequence clearly informed by Shannon's experience of the medical profession—he has so far opted against surgery—dancers in doctors' garb come after him in mock military march, wielding an IV and operating table. Though he escapes, they manage to force him to don a neck brace, and an ensuing duo in which Shannon struggles to perform a simple physical task, while green-gowned dancers cavort blithely beside him, would be too cruel a tableau of the shackle of permanent handicap if it were not also deftly comic.

In a finale suggestive of some playground idyll, where boys and girls take turns showing off and the public is treated to a panoply of improvised dance modes—house, funk, freestyle or a yet unpatented hybrid of the pop-and-lock signature of hip-hop—Shannon is both assimilated into and apart from the approbating crowd. That no one can do what he does, or at least with his degree of virtuosity, becomes cause for admiration rather than pity, and strikes no small triumph for a community (for whose rights Shannon lobbies in civilian life) blanketly regarded as unfortunate or second rate.

Remix is said to explore the street artists' relationship to the stage, but for a more authentic perspective, spectators may look forward to Shannon's "Creative Time" project come late March, when he will perform in yet undisclosed locations around his current home base of New York, and record observers' impressions on a specially conceived website (www.creativetime.org). The endeavor is intended to provide a glimpse into "the conceptual framework behind the artist's practice," and chiefly comes as a response to questions regularly hurled at Shannon as he travels at some velocity down city streets. That so far inconclusive interaction will be transposed along with live footage to the web, where everyone will have their say.

The virtual exercise will complement Shannon's pursuit of an already stellar performance career, which has taken him across the United States, as far afield as Jordan, and to far-flung sites in Western Europe, from Helsinki to Leeds to the gritty Paris suburb of Créteil, which improbably sponsors a major avant-garde arts center, and whose grim, blue-collar neighborhoods Shannon says remind him of his upbringing.

In each of these places, regardless of their contribution to the perennial novelties of street dance, *AOW: Remix* may have meaning. For it effectively showcases the creativity that can erupt around the corner, in pockets of the city far in every way from the stage, as dancers from all walks, as represented by the multi-ethnic Step Fenz, communicate via a language both individual and universal, to deliberately peaceful end. ■

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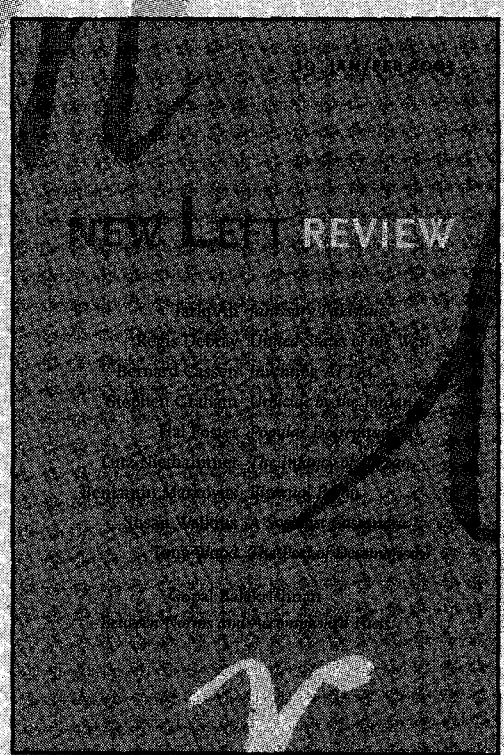

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FILMS

Global Visions

STUART KLAWANS

MYSTERIOUS OBJECT AT NOON • DEMONLOVER • THE LAST LETTER

Since few of us at *The Nation* speak Thai, I'm going to refer to my favorite filmmaker of the month as Joe, which is the name actually used in this country by Apichatpong Weerasethakul. Joe hails from the northeast of Thailand—so writes my principal source, the American critic Chuck Stephens—and attended the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, where he seems to have majored in Surrealism. Two years ago, he completed a feature titled *Blissfully Yours*, which I haven't seen. Almost nobody has in the United States; it's unreleased, and so it qualifies for the series "*Film Comment* Selects 2003," currently being shown at the Walter Reade Theater at New York's Lincoln Center.

The purpose of the series, curated by the editors of *Film Comment* magazine, is to screen what they consider to be the best recent films currently unavailable in the United States. If you can make it to the Walter Reade on February 11 or 12 (check schedule for showtimes), you'll probably find me in a seat nearby, sharing in the discovery of *Blissfully Yours*. If you can't get to those screenings, then let me tell you about Joe's first feature, *Mysterious Object at Noon*, which has just been released on DVD by the Plexifilm company (www.plexifilm.com).

Correction: Let me try to tell you about *Mysterious Object at Noon*, which comes so close to being indescribable that explanations run as long as the movie itself.

On one level, *Mysterious Object at Noon* is a documentary: a black-and-white, 16-millimeter road diary recorded in 1998, taking you from the north to the south of Thailand and introducing you to all sorts of people. You meet foodmongers, housebuilders, schoolchildren, kickboxers—the poor and the modest, but no one with money to speak of. Although Joe throws in some folks in Bangkok (such as squeegee boys, who ply their trade in a traffic jam), he's mostly interested in rural areas, and also in the modes of transport that get you through them: trucks, trains, boats.

What do the film's subjects talk about? Joe could have got them to tell of their own lives; but instead, having elicited the beginnings of a story from a vegetable seller, he asks people in each new place to make up their own continuations of the tale. *Mysterious Object at Noon* shows how the story grows, collectively and progressively. It also reveals the kinds of ideas that pop into the heads of Thai villagers, when they're encouraged to contribute to this Exquisite Corpse.

You might want to know that the original scrap of story concerns a crippled orphan boy. He views the world principally through the eyes of a teacher who brings him photographs—until one day she collapses, and a strange, round object rolls out of her skirt (giving the film its title). As Joe carries this narrative tatter to different people, it accumulates episodes involving metamorphoses, disguises, amulets, swords, an airplane crash, a kidnapping, Bangkok night life, a marriage proposal and two, maybe three tigers. In one of the film's high points, the story even turns into a play with music, performed by an itinerant acting troupe in a village square.

So *Mysterious Object at Noon* is also a fiction film. It tells you a story that's so astonishingly exciting, it's all but indecipherable.

Joe goes so far as to film some of the episodes that people make up, occasionally adding narrative details of his own. It seems, for example, that the story takes place at the end of World War II, amid solemn government orders to be friendly to Americans, buy American products and give Americans a 25 percent discount in bars. These decrees, issued over the radio, blend in with archival newsreels, contemporary television footage, pop songs, advertisements and political posters—which means that on yet another level, *Mysterious Object at Noon* is a compilation documentary, assembled from the artifacts of the Thai mass media.

Smart guy, this Joe. He's located a place where avant-garde practice merges with folk culture, to their mutual improvement; where people speak about such experiences

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as want and abandonment, but magically transform them into occasions of wonder. Whether his new film, *Blissfully Yours*, lives up to this precedent, I don't yet know (although *Film Comment* promises that it "flowers into a contemplative experience of terrific breadth and mystery"). But having marveled at *Mysterious Object at Noon*, I'm willing to swear by Apichatpong Weerasethakul.

A French filmmaker with an easier and more familiar name, Olivier Assayas, is also represented in the *Film Comment* series. I had a chance to preview his 2002 picture, *demonlover*, which shows on February 9, and can tell you not to worry if you miss it at Lincoln Center. This one is so slickly perverse, some distributor is bound to pick it up.

If you've seen Assayas's previous movies (such as *Cold Water*, *Irma Vep* or *Late August, Early September*), then you know he's an exceptionally thoughtful and knowledgeable filmmaker. That's why I bring *demonlover* to your attention—because in it, Assayas sums up our global corporate and media culture, and tells us it's worse than we'd feared.

He's set *demonlover* in the milieu of dealmakers: people who live in conference rooms, five-star hotels and the first-class sections of airplanes, where they spend their time working out three-way contracts among France, Japan and the United States. These people want their surroundings to be like a kiss, and every item had better wear lip gloss. The underlying business, on the other hand, is not so immaculate. The characters in *demonlover* are vying to control the distribution of the next generation of porn.

Now, as Assayas reminds us, the basic rule of the entertainment media (porn included) is that the fantasies being peddled today must always seem more three-dimensional—more *real*—than yesterday's products. A corollary: To be alluring, the ever-more-believable fantasy must also present something horrific, from which the viewer-participant feels safe. From this point of view, the dealmakers in *demonlover* are porn consumers of their own lives. Witness the film's opening shot: The characters (most of them) are asleep in the reclining seats of an airplane, like rows of eggs protected in glowing white incubators. Nothing is going to disturb these people. Above them, on video screens, a movie plays unwatched: row after row of the same fiery explosion.

These are the people who run the world, dreaming of mayhem. The story of *demonlover* concerns one of them, Diane, who imagines she's bringing real danger into their privileged sphere. She's a double agent in her corporation—a spy who sometimes slinks around in a cat-burglar outfit, like a newly updated version of Assayas's Irma Vep. But the movie departs from the relatively realistic terrain that Assayas has tended to occupy, in *Irma Vep* as elsewhere. It twists through increasingly lurid revelations like a David Lynch picture, or a variation on Cronenberg's *Videodrome*, until it becomes apparent that the media masters can contain Diane much better than she'd anticipated. She's not so much a disrupter of their repose as another object for their fantasies.

Summed up this way, *demonlover* might sound like just another sour pastiche, or (at best) a Frankfurt School essay dressed in Parisian chic. But it's a good deal creepier than that. Its final target is not the corporate masters but rather the consumers who share their appetites, who want to be like them in every way. I don't think I'm wrenching *demonlover* too far out of context when I say I watched it in a month of war porn, when our masters strove on television to make their dreams of mayhem become more three-dimensional, more interactive. I don't yet know how many consumers bought the product; but those who did must have felt safer, more privileged, for doing so, even while being maneuvered into a danger that is all too real.

I'm sorry to say that *demonlover* may be more than a movie.

Short Take: The great documentarian Frederick Wiseman has had a long fascination with the theater, which he's expressed (among other ways) by making a film about the Comédie Française. He subsequently directed a dramatic monologue there—his adaptation of a chapter from Vasily Grossman's novel *Life and Fate*—featuring the senior member of the company, Catherine Samie. His film version of this production, *The Last Letter*, was shown out of competition in the 2002 Cannes festival and is now having its theatrical debut at New York's Film Forum.

The text of *The Last Letter* is a farewell, sent to an absent son by a woman who is about to die in the Holocaust. She is a Jew, a doctor in a Ukrainian city, who was first shunned and plundered by her neighbors, then shut into a ghetto. Now she is about to be taken away in a transport, and she knows she won't be coming back. The child to whom she delivers her final testimony is in effect the audience, since she speaks directly to the camera and sometimes looks into it. Much of her monologue is recorded in closeup; but then, she is also absent throughout much of the movie, or rather is seen as a shadow on a scrim, as if already a ghost.

Since the substance of Grossman's text, though important, will be familiar to most audiences, I suppose the real interest of *The Last Letter* lies in Samie's performance. That's certainly what Wiseman focuses on, dwelling on the artfulness of each tremor of her hands, lingering on the nuances of her face during the inflection of each cadenced phrase. She comes before the camera without makeup, but outfitted with a lifetime's accumulation of acting technique. She and Wiseman make her skill into a monument: a tower of art, part flesh and part shadow, set up as a memorial. ■

In May

In May the paths into the dunes
are roped off from foot traffic
because the birds amass to breed.

You can watch them through binoculars
from the edge of a parking lot,
white invisible deltas that drop

and glint, cataractic floaters
against the sun rising from the sea
or fluttering midday from nests

spiked inside the broken clumps
of compass grass. Or on a plaque
read about a lighthouse stretched

like bones beneath the waves.
When Herakleitus observed,
"you can't step twice into the same river,"

he didn't mean you couldn't trust
experience but thought to illustrate
how "nature loves to hide" beneath

its own swift surfaces. He meant
there's pleasure in deception
not despair, delight when we recognize

a tern's or plover's flash and glitter,
silhouettes that navigate the thermal river,
declare themselves like scraps of paper

then disappear.

Michael Collier

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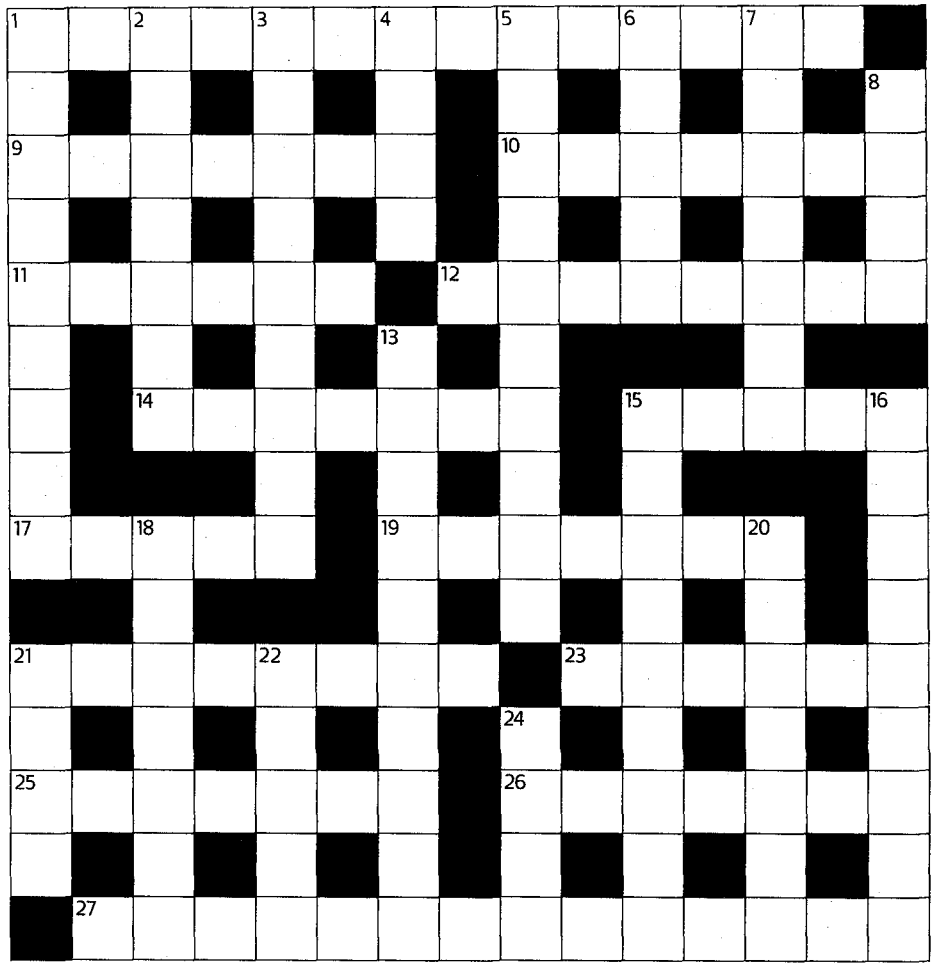

ACROSS

1 Bats and old hags who don't take tea, as one hears, but still get something to eat. (4,10)

9 Evidently the bard is sick of nastiness toward others! (3,4)

10 You might find it even a place to hire a boat, if you want to go anywhere. (7)

11 Said to be pushed by the 15 and 21 across, however not backward! (6)

12 Fifty, surrounded by retribution, lets you hear what you said with it. (8)

14 What the finished-up gardener puts in a country dance. (7)

15 and **21** Very much afraid it's like a god of the forests, with a lot of "yen" about a clever device. (5-8)

17 Uncaps? (5)

19 How vaudeville stars make a living, one after another? (2,5)

21 See 15

23 First-class foot trouble inside, with such an animal! (6)

25 Use a lax alternative, and such will probably not not engage in promiscuous activity! (7)

26 Show support for a woman getting sick, to a point—you have to feel it to understand it! (7)

27 You might say you expect to kick the bucket, if you do this first. (5,4,5)

DOWN

1 What is illegal on the playing field goes to the directors—where important notes might appear. (9)

2 The sort of lunch at which you will see a way to open some doors. (7)

3 Makes a minor error and roves all over the place to find things that should keep you warm. (9)

4 One certainly can't say this flow of water goes in a straight line. (4)

5 Does it measure how long it takes to say goodbye? (You might be a real operator to be concerned with such.) (10)

6 The C&Y that weight-carriers may try not to take. (5)

7 Boarders, in a sense, might do it, which is the possible net result with a little comedown. (7)

8 and **16** Where some find a man to be early—not blond and exercising self-restraint after nightfall. (4,9)

13 A couple might be found out with it, which some trackgoers do daily as a switch. (6-4)

15 It might be a bit of writing equal to silver being put on David's instrument, played badly. (9)

16 See 8

18 Desist from this, which is the way some eager types are loaded. (7)

20 The mantis shrimp, as it appears going up around the old writer. (7)

21 When cars are wrecked, and you get real sore, this might be the end result. (4)

22 What you see here is what you get, with numbers put to bad use. (5)

24 This is almost about one whose tribe was expected to increase. (4)

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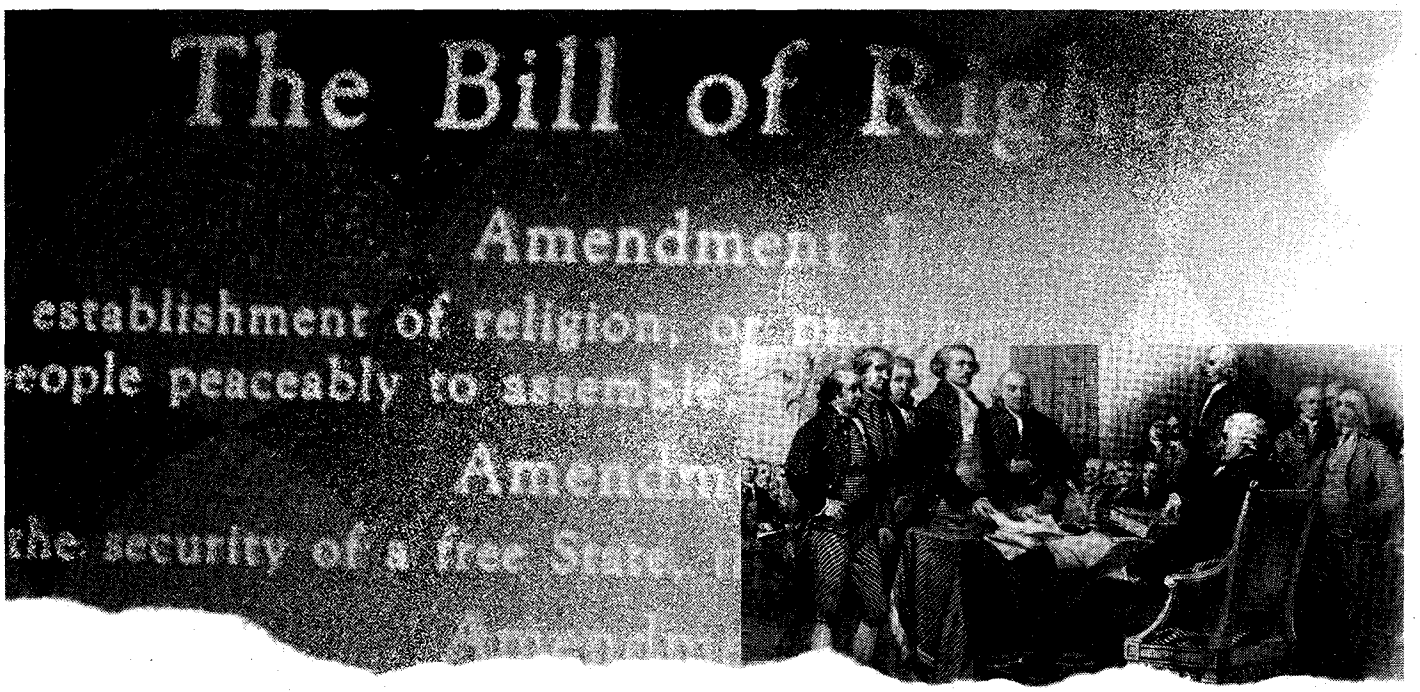

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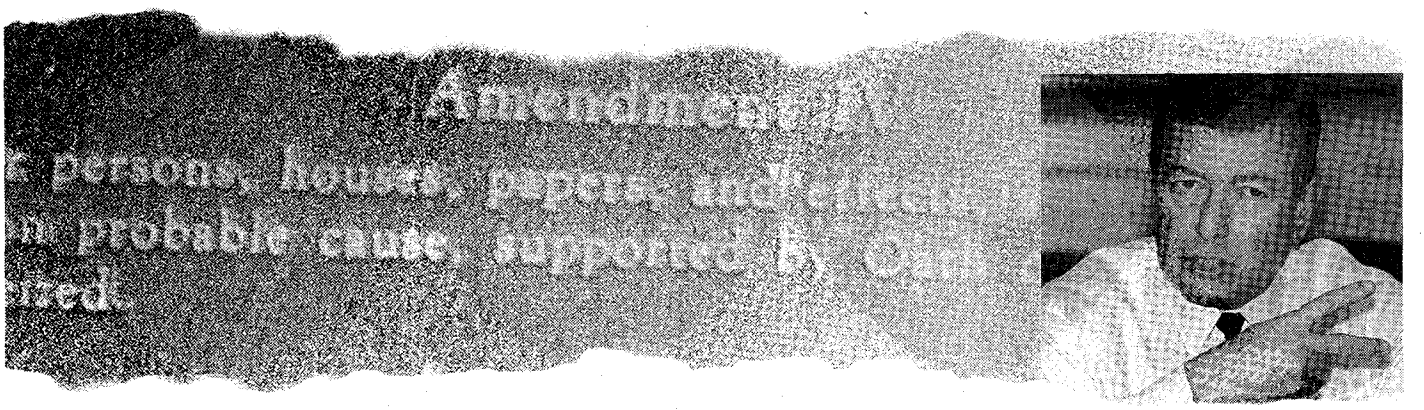

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